

a star trek
fanzine

Scotpress



ENTERPRISE

LOG ENTRIES 82

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A ScoTpress publication

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Enterprise - Log Entries 82 is put out by ScoTpress and is available from -

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ScoTpress - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini, Janet Quarton & Shona

Helle, and welcome to LR 82.

We have three long stories in this issue. Ross and Joyce are known to regular readers; however, Ann James is a new writer we are welcoming to our pages. We hope you enjoy her story as much as we did.

Our stock of stories for publication is looking good right now; we have enough stories for LE 83, while MAKE IT SO, our TNG zine, now has issue 3 ready and we already have some material for No. 4; Lyn Viviers' Classic Trek novella, FALLEN ANGEL, is also typed and we hope will be ready for Frontiers. Our 'companion' press, IDIC, also has two zines almost ready for printing - IDIC LOG 2 is a novel by a new writer, Christopher Ng, while IDIC LOG 3 is a return to a zine of short stories.

We are occasionally asked about letters of comment, and the topic has come up again recently. We would be delighted to have an LOC page in LOG ENTRIES, but we do need the letters. If you would like to comment on any of the material in this (or earlier) issues please send your letters to me. We would ask that you make constructive criticism - if you don't like something, tell us why, and what you think could have been done to improve it - as well as letting us know what you do enjoy. It is very rewarding for the contributors to get reactions from the readers, so if there is a good response, we would be happy to make an LOC page a feature of LOG ENTRIES in future.

We hope to see you at Frontiers.

Yahne

We are soliciting contributions of short stories for inclusion in Scotpress zines as well as longer ones suitable for printing on their own. No death of main characters (except Yar), no K/S, no stories about other ships; these are, after all, 'the voyages of the Starship Enterprise...' Submissions may be sent to either

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ONE WAY TO HELL

by

Rosa Caccioppo

"Personal Log, Dr. Leonard McCoy, Stardate 2253.8

"It is very difficult to describe exactly what happened, and how it happened, but this was the one time in my life when I was truly afraid that there wouldn't be any more tomorrows for us."

The image of the wreck occupied the whole main screen on the bridge. It was only 15,000 miles from the Enterprise; still, its dimensions were tremendous. Before it the Starfleet vessel looked like a mouse compared with an elephant. It was composed of a cylindrical body from which extended two large platforms with domes and spheres, all of them connected by gigantic metal tubes.

"Change angle," ordered Kirk calmly, but without diverting his eyes from the screen.

Lt. Uhura flicked some buttons on her console and obeyed. The image changed, and the alien wreck showed its bow almost threateningly; its outside structure looked damaged.

"Dimensions, Mr. Spock?" The Captain's cool voice broke the dismayed silence.

"Length, 7.4 miles; width, 4.6 miles; height, 720 metres; weight, 40 10 o tons." The First Officer announced the data distinctly and slowly, without any trace of emotion. His voice faded into a heavy silence, broken only by the tick of the instruments.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed McCoy, widening his blue eyes.

Kirk stood up and looked aside. The doctor swallowed, gazing at the screen.

"It's incredible!" A choking comment came from the engineering station. Scott was the best engineer in Starfleet, and one had to believe him.

"Unbelievable, but true," replied Kirk, keeping his usual calm.

Spock was bent over the small monitor at his console, reading the data that the sensors were picking up. A line of lights was flashing, while an almost imperceptible sound continued until a readout appeared on the screen. Spock studied it, pressed a lever, and some mathematical formulae appeared on the monitors above him. He pivoted his chair, facing Kirk.

"Captain," he called, "I am picking up life-form readings aboard; they seem to be humanoid."

Dr. McCoy frowned and approached him, scanning the screen

attentively.

Kirk kept silent for a short moment, then decided. "Lt. Uhura, go to yellow alert."

McCoy looked at him seriously. "If they intend to kill us, we've no way of getting to safety," he commented with a dry throat.

"Uhura, open a channel," ordered Kirk, pretending not to hear McCoy's words.

The Communications Officer obeyed promptly. She pushed a button then nodded affirmatively to Kirk.

"This is the USS Enterprise on a peaceful mission. Please respond."

The message was repeated twice. No answer followed.

The doctor moved to the biotester's screen over the science station, scrutinising the data, and he exchanged a sharp look with Spock.

"Jim, life readings are very low," said the Chief Medical Officer. "Whoever is aboard that wreck is dying."

All the officers on the bridge fell silent again. A worried expression of expectancy was painted on their faces, and Kirk could feel the tension. He turned to the engineering station.

"Mr. Scott, find sure coordinates to beam us aboard the wrecked ship." Then he turned back to McCoy. "Bones, you'll come with me." He took a step towards Uhura. "Tell Lt. Bowman to report to the transporter room."

The Vulcan left his seat, following Kirk, who stopped and shook his head. "I'm sorry, Spock, I can't risk both of us. I entrust you with the ship," he said, touching his arm lightly in a gesture of respect and friendship.

The First Officer nodded silently and headed to the command chair, while the turbolift doors closed behind Kirk and McCoy.

Lt. Kyle transported them aboard the alien wreck, where the life readings had been picked up. They scanned around. They seemed to be in a sort of control room, with long automatic consoles, monitors, and unknown instruments.

Kirk gestured to Lt. Bowman to move forward. The security officer drew his phaser and headed for the door, which swooshed open. The Captain and Dr. McCoy exchanged a perplexed look; it seemed an invitation to advance.

The doctor set his tricorder and pointed it at the corridor before them. They moved forward, slowly and carefully.

Outside the ship was very damaged; inside it was intact - strangely intact, and that made Kirk suspicious.

The boarding party reached a large door, and McCoy stopped. A small flashing light on his tricorder grew fixed. "They're in

there," he said in a low voice.

Kirk looked around again. All was silent. "Okay, go."

At his words the wall slid and opened.

Kirk's suspicions increased. A shiver ran along his back. A vague feeling of danger gave him the creeps. He stiffened, dispelling the fear. Many times he had faced the unknown, many times he had won against death, many times he had fought against evil...

They entered what appeared to be an engine room, or something close to it. Kirk stepped forward slowly, his phaser levelled. Two humanoids were seated at a console. Their heads lolled back; apparently they were unconscious.

The doctor reached the two forms and passed his scanner over the bodies.

"Well?"

"They're alive, Jim." He paused. "I don't know what happened. I think I must take them to sickbay to find out."

Kirk nodded affirmatively, and took the communicator from his belt, keeping the phaser levelled. McCoy noticed that, and saw too that Kirk's hazel eyes were darkened.

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Spock here," the First Officer's cold, reassuring voice answered.

"Spock, we found some survivors. We need a medical team in the transporter room. Tell Mr. Scott to beam us back."

"Aye, sir."

"Kirk out."

The Captain watched the alien McCoy was analysing. His features were repellent. Thick hair and a long beard framed a sullen face with only one eye in the middle of the forehead. Kirk thought of Polyphemus and the legendary adventures of Ulysses, and his suspicions returned. The aliens were wearing heavy uniforms bordered with fur. On their home planet the temperature had to be very cold.

The transporter signal sounded, and the boarding party stood near the two aliens. Shining columns of light enveloped their bodies, beaming them back to the Enterprise.

The two survivors were entrusted to Dr. McCoy's care, and in a few hours they were able to answer the Captain's questions.

The vague suspicion insinuating itself into Kirk's mind became worry, but the sensors couldn't be wrong. A vessel couldn't be half destroyed outside and remain intact inside. And why its enormous dimensions? Maybe the vessel was designed to transport a whole population, but why? Were they invaders? These were only

suspicions and conjectures; he would have to learn the truth from the aliens.

Kirk was sitting at the desk in his quarters when the intercom buzzed. He flicked it on thoughtfully.

"Jim, our guests have woken up," McCoy's voice announced.

"I'm on my way," replied Kirk, standing up and cutting the communication.

The Captain went down to sickbay and found the survivors lying on two beds in the convalescent ward. McCoy surveyed the data on the diagnostic panels; they were unusual, according to Human parameters.

"Oh, Jim," exclaimed the doctor as he saw Kirk, "may I introduce Commander Thul and his aide, Subcommander Rhav."

Kirk bowed his head slightly as a sign of greeting. "My name is Captain James Tiberius Kirk. You are aboard the USS Enterprise of the United Federation of Planets." He kept a severe expression as he introduced himself; something warned him not to appear too friendly.

The alien called Thul smiled, but to Kirk it looked more like a sneer, and he again felt a sense of disgust. He remembered that at Starfleet Academy they taught the cadets to respect any kind of life-form, and restrained his feelings.

"I am sorry to have caused you inconvenience," Thul said, speaking in perfect Standard. "We have had an accident... our instruments have been destroyed..." His voice was harsh and grating, and he took deep breaths while speaking.

"What is your home planet?" asked Kirk, folding his arms.

"We come from very far... Maldhor is its name." Thul close his sole eye, and sighed deeply again.

Kirk had never heard of that world. "Where is it located?"

"H24/c36," answered the alien, "but I don't think you know our mapping system."

Kirk did not like Thul's tone, and frowned. "Commander Thul, two people are far too small a crew for a ship of such dimensions," he said.

"Our ship is perfect." Thul's voice sounded full of pride, which increased Kirk's sense of unease.

"I'd like to know the reason for such dimensions." The Captain's insistence was firm, but kind.

Thul did not answer. He closed his eye tiredly. The doctor looked up at the panel and shook his head.

"Stop it, please, Jim," he said in a low voice, pointing to the monitor. The alien's heartbeat was irregular.

Kirk nodded and stared at the alien, who pretended to sleep. "See you later," he replied, and strode out of the room, leaving

McCoy with the survivors.

That conversation had an opposite effect; instead of dissolving his doubts it had increased them. Thul's way of speaking struck him as being too sure and too elusive. Worried, Kirk walked through the empty corridors, caught the turbolift, and a few moments later he stepped onto the bridge.

Mr. Spock was sitting at his station; as he heard him he turned around and marked the vexed expression that darkened Kirk's features.

The Captain pretended not to see him. He reached his command chair and switched on the intercom.

"Lt. Bowman!" he called.

"Aye, sir," the security officer answered.

"Put two guards in sickbay." Kirk paused, looking at nothing. "I want those two aliens watched night and day."

His words struck Uhura, who turned slightly, her forehead creasing. Sulu and Chekov exchanged a puzzled look. The Vulcan stood up silently, arms clasped at his back, and stared at Kirk, raising a quizzical eyebrow. What had roused Kirk's sixth sense?

The Captain noticed Spock's gesture, and cast a quick look at him. The Vulcan avoided his gaze and moved to the engineering station, continuing his work.

At that moment Lt. Kyle was alone in the transporter room. Kneeling on the floor, he was surveying a secondary circuit when he heard the usual buzzing of the materialiser. He sprang to his feet, amazed, and saw an unknown Maldhorian appear on the platform. The alien's eye was very grim, and he carried a cylindrical container with a spout.

Kyle remained motionless, terrified, then realised just in time that he had to push the intercom button.

"Red alert! Intruder aboard! Red al..." He fell unconscious, hit by an alien phaser.

Klaxons rang out throughout the Enterprise. Ignoring them, the Maldhorian opened a hatch on the transporter room wall and inserted the spout of his container. The hatch bore the words, 'Ventilation System'.

All hell broke out on the bridge. Uhura immediately found the deck where the alarm had been raised. Kirk and Spock hurried to the turbolift, but the doors opened and Commander Thul and his aide Rhav stepped out with weapons levelled threateningly. The officers widened their eyes, dismayed. Spock only moved back, raising an annoyed eyebrow.

"I suggest you do not move, Captain!" The alien spoke haughtily, and put his gun against Kirk's chest.

"What do you want?" Kirk asked harshly.

"You!" was the answer, and everyone looked at one another without understanding. "Your arms and your minds!" A cruel sneer was painted on those horrible faces.

Dr. McCoy had heard the Red Alert while he was going to the bridge, but he did not worry - that klaxon had become so familiar.

The turbolift doors opened, and an unaware McCoy entered the bridge, to be seized and pushed violently against the helm station. The poor doctor stared incredulously; he had left the two survivors in sickbay minutes before. He thought about the guards, and hoped they were still alive.

Silence enveloped the bridge, heavy with fear and tension. The officers began to smell something strange in the air. McCoy rested his hand on Kirk's arm.

"Gas - nerve gas!" he exclaimed, a note of terror in his voice.

Someone coughed.

Spock moved closer to the Captain and gestured slightly to a phaser on the helm console. Kirk understood and looked at Thul with rage. He waited a moment, then tried to move rapidly, but Thul was quicker, and the beam of his weapon hit the Captain's shoulder, causing a deep, bleeding wound. The doctor supported him, restraining a shriek of hatred and grief.

Spock stiffened, but felt that his lungs were not managing to draw in more air. The nerve gas was working, and the Maldhorians seemed immune.

Thul burst into rough gloomy laughter. "Now you are our slaves!" He turned his fire-like eye around the stations. The officers were beginning to lose consciousness one by one.

Impotent and half suffocated, Kirk dropped to the floor with a moan. McCoy cast a desperate look at Spock, then his sight dimmed and he sank to the floor beside Kirk. The First Officer lasted a few more seconds, but his breathing was becoming even more laboured and he fell to his knees, his hands pressed to his throat, then he collapsed face down on the deck.

The third Maldorian stepped onto the bridge and looked rapidly at the officers slumped on the floor, moving among their bodies. He stopped before Mr. Spock and turned him over with his foot.

"He is the half-Vulcan."

"And this is Kirk." Rhav pointed to the wounded Captain.

"They'll be able to serve us more than the others," Thul croaked.

Kirk was put in a narrow, dark, underground cell; a very dim light penetrated through a small window in the ceiling. He moved slowly. Under the closed lids his eyes rolled, and he was breathing with difficulty. He realised that he was lying on something soft and damp. He had no strength to move, and he tried to open his eyes with no success. The wound in his shoulder afflicted him, and the waves of ever more violent pain dulled his brain. He groaned,

hearing the dull sound of footsteps approaching, but he felt drowsy, and a more intense wave of pain drove him again into the dark well from which he had been slowly emerging.

Commander Thul and his guest reached the cell and opened the heavy door. They entered, lighting it with a torch.

"Here he is."

"He's still unconscious," the guest noticed.

Thul nodded and went out hastily, returning shortly thereafter with another alien who wore a long white hooded robe. He pointed at Kirk, and the third alien bent over the Captain's body and looked at the wound, which was bleeding again.

"He'll live," he said.

"He must live," Thul replied coldly, and they left the wet, dark cell. "Let's go back to my office."

They crossed a short corridor tunnelled through the rock, went upstairs, and stopped before another cell. A guard had already opened the door; an unconscious Enterprise officer was lying on the dirty floor.

"He's the Chief Surgeon," Thul informed his guest.

The other nodded, and they went out.

In his office Thul looked at his guest. "It is done!" His sole eye flashed with pride. "You have the unbeatable Enterprise, and we have more slaves - very intelligent ones."

The guest nodded, adjusting his gold cloak on his shoulders. "Now begins the most difficult part," he said coldly. "It's almost impossible to penetrate the security code that blocks their computer."

Thul rose up and eyed him. "They themselves will give us the security code," he replied in a firm tone.

His companion folded his arms, puzzled. "Starfleet officers are able to resist the most sophisticated mental and physical torture," he insisted.

"You don't know our systems," said Thul in a sibilant tone. "The old methods are always the best; hard work, loneliness and despair are the keys."

Silence fell for a short while, and Thul read worry on his guest's face. "You will have the map of the new Starfleet defence system," he said emphatically.

"What is this key you mentioned?"

Thul sneered. "I will send all the prisoners to the mines."

The guest frowned, and stared at him. "They must not discover the dilithium," he said in a voice like gravel.

Thul laughed gibingly. "I'm not a fool. You must have more trust in your allies."

The other breathed heavily. "My scientists are still trying to decipher that damned code."

Thul shook his head. "You'll have to wait."

"How long? Months? Years? Kirk and his crew are not frightened by loneliness and hard work." He kept his puzzled expression.

"Just a few days," was Thul's rapid, annoyed answer.

The door bell chimed, Thul flicked a button on his desk, and a soldier entered, springing to attention.

"Thaor told me to inform you that the prisoners are regaining consciousness."

Commander Thul nodded and dismissed the soldier with a curt gesture. When they were again alone he faced his guest coldly.

"Admiral Kalb of Klingon, the final triumph will soon be yours!"

Spock found himself crouched against something hard and cold; he was panting - perhaps it was still the effect of the nerve gas. His muscles felt tired, and his body heavy. He was trying to concentrate his mental forces on nullifying that strange feeling of weakness when he heard a moan beside him. With an effort, he opened his eyes. He was unable to focus, but little by little his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, and he saw a stone ceiling.

He looked around. He was in a cavern, together with other officers from the Science Section, who were also regaining consciousness. He recognised Ensign Julie Lindford, one of his best students. Her long blonde hair was dirty and muddy. She moaned again. He dragged himself over to her.

"Ensign Lindford!" he called gently, and raised her head slightly.

The girl groaned feebly, and slowly opened her blue eyes. "Where... where am I?" she mumbled faintly.

"I do not know, Ensign," the First Officer answered, helping her to her feet.

"Mr. Spock!" someone called from behind him. He turned back; it was Lieutenant Kyle.

"Mr. Spock, I saw a Maldhorian - he beamed aboard without authorisation. I had no time..." Kyle sighed. "What happened?"

The Vulcan shook his head, and stretched out a hand to help the young officer to rise.

Slowly everyone recovered their senses, and realised that they were closed into a cavern. The air stank with a horrid and offensive smell. Julie grimaced and caught Spock's attention, pointing to a heavy rusty railing at the end of the cave.

The Vulcan was moving closer to it when four Maldhorians

appeared, armed with a type of sword with a twisted blade, and guns similar to heavy phasers. Spock stood at the head of the group; he was aching, but willed himself not to show any pain.

"Who are you? Where are Captain Kirk and the other officers?" His voice echoed with authority.

The jailers replied by aiming the weapons, then they gestured to the crew to move away, and pushed Julie Lindford, who collapsed to the ground. Spock bent over her, then stared at the aliens coldly. A Maldhorian noticed that and rested the blade of his sword on the Vulcan's throat. Spock backed off at once, raising an eyebrow, and decided that it was better to yield.

The group of prisoners walked through a short underground passage and entered a very large cavern where there was a large number of humanoids. They recognised Andorians, Tellarites, the tattered uniforms identifying crewmembers of ships that had been reported destroyed or vanished under mysterious circumstances. Everyone was filthy, and chained. They were digging with picks, moaning under the whips that lashed naked shoulders covered with scars. It was a hellish vision.

Julie restrained a cry of horror. The First Officer kept his stern face, although he felt his stomach twisting with revulsion. The chief of the guards gestured, and the jailers pushed the group forward. Kyle rebelled, and a lash tore his uniform, injuring his chest. Julie supported him, looking desperately at Spock. The aliens chained all of them, and gave them picks.

So began the saddest captivity the crew of the Enterprise had ever known.

The wound was aching, but the pain was bearable. Kirk made an effort and willed himself to open his eyes. At first he couldn't focus; the light was too faint. Some seconds passed, then he realised he was in a cell, a dungeon carved in the rock. He raised a hand slowly; his muscles did not respond to his brain's orders. He touched his shoulder; the wound had been bandaged. Someone had cared for him. He hoped it had been McCoy.

The thought of his ship increased his strength. He remembered... The wreck, the survivors, the nerve gas... He had to be on Maldhor. But where were his crew? What had happened to his ship?

He drew himself up, grimacing with pain, staring into the darkness. There was a violent clash, and the heavy door opened. Kirk started, and turned as Thul entered, holding a twisted sword. The alien's grim expression made him shudder.

The Maldhorian stopped a few feet from him. The Captain clung to the rock wall, and a flash of pride brightened his hazel eyes.

"What did you do to my ship?" he shouted gratingly. His face was contorted with pain, sweat beaded his brow. He felt dirty and humiliated.

The alien did not reply.

Kirk felt a surge of adrenalin, and a furious sense of

impotence overwhelmed him. "Where are my crew, you damned bastard?"

Thul turned and moved away, but stopped at the doorway. "You Humans are very intelligent and strong," he said thoughtfully, and closed the heavy door behind him.

Kirk did not understand what he meant. He tried to stand up, but he was too weak, and sank to the ground, moaning.

In the corridor Thul met the chief of the guards.

"When he recovers his strength, take him to the 19th level."

The jailer replied with an affirmative grunt.

A cold shiver ran down McCoy's spine and he woke. He was lying on something damp and hard, and his back was aching. He stretched out a hand and groped around him, and found a handful of straw. He tried to breathe deeply, but stopped, feeling a stitch in his chest. A stale, pungent stench filled his nose, and his muscles seemed numb, so that he had difficulty in moving.

With an effort he opened his eyes. Darkness surrounded him. He shuddered again. A distant memory surfaced in his mind - when he was a child he had been afraid of the dark. His throat was dry. He closed his eyes and opened them again, slowly. Again he was aware of that acrid, musty smell. At last he began to focus on his surroundings. He drew himself up, resting on his elbow. A feeble light was filtering through from above. It was the worst of all nightmares.

He was a prisoner in a cell excavated in the rock; the walls were covered with moss and fungus. A squeak close by caught his attention, and he turned suddenly. A small animal, like a big hairy mouse, passed a few inches from his arm. He grimaced in disgust and moved aside, gritting his teeth. His left leg was aching, and he was panting for breath. He swallowed.

"I am a Starfleet officer, and I must behave like one!"

He rose with a great effort and leaned against the wall, looking up to where the light was filtering through a small opening between the ceiling and the wall, a sort of grated window. He walked slowly to the heavy wooden door, which was reinforced by rusty iron bars. There was a handle; he seized and pulled it. A wave of pain exploded in his brain, and he discovered that his hands were covered with sores. He felt very tired and weak.

It is really a nightmare, he thought. Where is the Enterprise? Oh god! The wreck... the false survivors... Maldhorians took us prisoners... Jim... Jim has been injured! Thul has taken the ship...

"Jim! Spock! What's happening?" His voice echoed in the empty cell.

McCoy couldn't remember how much time had passed since their capture. Hours? Maybe days or weeks.

Little by little he remembered being in a sort of mine. There had been a collapse, and he had lost consciousness. Perhaps he had

remained in that state for days.

His mind was pinched with mournful thoughts when he heard the door bolt clicking. He started and backed off. The heavy door creaked open and a Maldhorian wearing a long cloak entered. He held a bowl that he put on the floor without speaking.

McCoy grasped him by the arm. "Where are my friends? Where is Captain Kirk?" he asked in a harsh and angry voice.

The guard freed himself with a violent tug and pushed the doctor away, then slammed the door behind him.

McCoy banged a clenched fist on the door. "Answer me, you damned bastard! Where is Jim?"

Silence.

"Answer me! Where is Spock? Where... where is Christine...?" His voice became a whisper. "Where are my...? Please, answer me..."

He rested his forehead on his arm for a moment, feeling himself exhausted, then sank down on the damp floor, his back against the cold rock, and a shiver ran through his body. He looked at the bowl, which was filled with a yellowish liquid with some pieces of meat. The pangs of hunger became more violent, but it would take courage to eat that revolting soup. McCoy sighed; the Maldhorians seemed to know nothing of spoons and forks. He plunged his fingers into the bowl and took out a piece of meat; trying not to smell it, he chewed slowly. The taste didn't seem too bad - it was a little bitter, but edible. He took courage and swallowed, then ate another piece and another; he thought he would never be able to drink that dish-water, but he did.

A Starfleet officer should not come to such a condition. McCoy felt disgusted with his unkempt, unshaven state. His uniform was ragged and dirty, sticking to his skin, giving him a horrible sensation. He rested his head on his knees.

"My god! My god, help me... please!" he whispered, crying desperately. "Give me hope that Jim and Spock are alive..."

Tiredness took advantage of him, and he dropped to the floor, asleep. And he dreamed.

He dreamed he was on the bridge, near the First Officer. Spock was smiling. "Bones, I agree with you." His voice was so friendly...

Only a dream. McCoy swallowed the tears. A dream that had seemed so real.

"Spock... Jim... where are you? Spock, I swear solemnly I won't tease you any more..." he moaned, half asleep.

For two days they dug and transported some slabs in the large underground quarry. The Vulcan tried in vain to break the metal chain, but his strength failed, and a latent rage began to fill his mind. He calculated that the day lasted 22 hours, divided into 16 hours of work and 6 hours of rest. At the end of the work period

the jailers brought Spock and his officers a big bowl of stew, which the Vulcan continued to refuse.

On the third day the First Officer had just begun to dig when the other slaves finished cutting a big block, and the guards gestured to Spock, Kyle and Julie Lindford to help transport it. The girl was no longer steady on her feet; weak and exhausted, she stumbled over a sharp projection of rock and fell, screaming.

A slave let go the rope supporting the slab, which began to slide towards Julie, who had slumped down. Spock left his rope and jumped towards her, but a Maldhorian aimed a gun at him.

It was a matter of a moment.

He saw the girl turn pale as the stone block approached. She cried out in fear and pain. Her blue eyes widened and filled with tears. Death was coming to her. She stretched out her arms to Spock, unable to move - her feet were trapped in a small crack.

"Spock, help me... help me, please!"

He made a move towards her, and rapidly another Maldhorian rested his weapon at his back.

"Mr. Spock... Sp..."

Julie couldn't finish his name. The heavy slab fell over the girl and ripped her belly. Red blood covered the stone, and spouted onto Spock's uniform.

He cast a horrified glance and closed his eyes with nausea. A strange, tearing rage filled his heart, and he had to will control on himself, but felt his mental power to be weak.

Someone cried out and burst into tears, then silence fell on the prisoners. Lt. Kyle raged with hatred and fury, and threw himself on the nearest guard. He locked an arm around the Maldhorian's neck. Another of the aliens suddenly lifted his dagger and threw it at the young officer.

Spock did not hesitate. Leaping over the picks he drew Kyle away with all his strength, saving his life, for just a moment later the lethal dagger clipped open the jailer's belly.

A cry rent the oppressive air. "Take that man to the 21st level!" thundered Thul, who had seen everything, pointing at Spock.

Two guards moved to him quickly and grasped him by the arms. Kyle stepped forward with a bellicose expression. The First Officer looked at him sternly, shaking his head; impotent, they watched him taken away.

Spock had spent three days trying to find a solution to the problem, in vain. The jailers had closed him into a small and evil-smelling cell. Many times he had tested the resistance of the heavy door. He had been feeling an unusual sensation, similar to Human wrath, and had begun to suspect that someone or something was influencing his mind.

Now he was standing rigid, his head lifted up with pride.

before Commander Thul.

"I want an answer. Where is Captain Kirk?" he asked in a cutting voice. "Where are my officers?"

The Maldhorian stared at him piercingly. "They are dead. All of them, dead."

"I don't believe you. It is illogical," the Vulcan replied harshly.

"All of the crew of your ship have been killed. You are the only survivor." The words seemed to come from a bottomless pit. "We need you to reveal the secret code for the computer."

Spock's heart lurched. "I swear by my honour as a Vulcan and as a Starfleet officer, you will never have that information."

Thul snickered. "Vulcan and Earth are very far from here!" He moved, and in the doorway turned to Spock again. "You'll give us the code because your glorious vessel is now in a hangar on Maldhor's surface."

The First Officer raised a puzzled eyebrow. "It is impossible."

"You still have a lot to learn," Thul sneered, and slammed the heavy wooden door behind him.

Spock remained motionless and heard the click of the bolt. He frowned. During his life in Starfleet he had witnessed many horrors. This was different. He would never forget Julie's terrified look as she died under that big slab down there in that infernal mine.

He closed his deep, dark eyes for a moment. The officers, whipped, tortured, and killed? He heard again in his mind Julie's heart-rending scream, and saw Kirk's proud look of challenge before being wounded. Jim had been seriously injured during the attack. Maybe he really was dead!

He clenched his fists tightly. Damn it! He had to be calm. He had to recover his self control. A Vulcan could not permit himself any emotion. He breathed deeply. According to his calculations they had been prisoners for six days. They...?

He had to verify Thul's statement. His mind was able to do it. He imposed an absolute calm upon himself. Kneeling in the Vulcan way, he tried to free his mind of all emotion. Closing his eyes he folded his hands, raised them to his forehead and began to concentrate. Emotions were a real block for his telepathic mind. Some minutes passed. A dark vortex sucked him back. His mind was responding to his efforts.

A beam of white light touched him, making his shudder.

Captain Kirk? Jim?

He visualised the features of his friend. The mind meld had begun. The thread of mental energy became an ever darker, endless spiral. Pain? Yes, pain! He felt a wave of pain across his mind.

Pain and grief.

Impotence and regret.

Repulsion and sorrow.

Rage and resignation.

Peace and pride.

A whirl of feelings invaded his mind.

Peace?

A cloud of incandescent light imploded and it was peace, again...

The spiral disappeared in the nothingness, and his mind returned, empty.

Spock widened his eyes. His face looked as though it was carved in stone. He held his breath and tried to focus again on what his mind had just reached, in vain. A discharge of adrenalin surged through his body. His nerves were skin-deep. His heart was flaming... Hatred! A deep, mortal hatred was filling his soul.

A Vulcan couldn't feel hatred, but at that moment he was feeling a dreadful hate.

The mind meld had failed.

He was aware of his mental power. Maybe there was still the possibility... Maybe his mind had mistaken...

If the Maldhorians had killed Kirk, McCoy and the other officers, if they had taken possession of the Enterprise, no-one could help him. No-one could have returned home. The ship's computer contained the whole of Human and humanoid knowledge, and the new Starfleet defence plan. He would never allow such havoc, never! Even at the cost of his own life.

James Tiberius Kirk was floating in a dark and padded fog. He seemed to be in a state of non-existence; his mind was a blank. Then, suddenly, colours exploded and his memory lit up. That horrid sensation of death disappeared slowly, and at last he felt alive again. He blinked his eyes, but could not focus. His mind was still confused, and his thoughts wandered through an endless dark vacuum. He was emerging from that darkness with great difficulty.

Now he was walking on a dark meadow. His feet were wet, strangely. He stumbled and fell. There was no meadow. There was... what? Where am I?

He realised. He was lying... where? He stretched out his hand cautiously and touched his bed? Bed? A damp and stinking straw mattress. He made an effort and tried to sit up, but he was off balance and sank back on the paliasse. He frowned and widened his hazel eyes, staring into the darkness that surrounded him. His brain answered, and slowly everything became clearer and clearer.

Maldhor... The attack... The nerve gas... An alien had injured him seriously. He was remembering. Instinctively he touched his left shoulder. It was bandaged, but wasn't aching any

more. He rubbed his eyes with both hands.

"Bastard! Damn it!" he cursed, summoned up his courage, and sat up with a deep breath. His wound seemed healed. Maldhorians were able physicians, he thought with a bitter smile. Anyway, they had cured him very well.

He rose, and discovered that he was chained. Heavy fetters hindered his movements. He snorted with rage.

Incredible! He should have been feeling weak; instead, he had the strength of a bull.

A word formed in his mind. Escape. It was the first thing to do. Spock, McCoy, Scott, his other officers... where were they? What had happened to the Enterprise?

He snorted again, looking around. There was only stone. The cell had been excavated in the rock, and the only exit was a heavy wooden door. He scrutinised the ceiling, and saw a very small hole where a dim light was penetrating. It seemed a nightmare - and he did not like nightmares.

The sound of approaching footsteps halted his thoughts. There was a creak, and the door opened. Two Maldhorians entered the cell. Kirk faced them with a cold expression.

"Where are my officers? Where is my ship? I want to speak with Thul!" he challenged them.

The aliens did not answer; they seized him by the arms and threw him out. The Captain tried to struggle, but any resistance was useless.

"I want to speak with Thul. What have you done with my officers?"

The jailers remained silent.

They walked through a long corridor and passed other cells. Kirk dug in his heels and balked.

"Where are my crew? Spock! McCoy!" he cried out. Something in his mind was telling him that his officers were shut into those cells.

But he could hear only the dull echo of his own voice. No-one answered.

Spock didn't give up. The following day he tried again to mind meld with Kirk. He knew that the link was very difficult at a distance, but it was not impossible, and he was fully able to do it. Many times in the past the situation had required a mind meld with Kirk; maybe a thin thread remained, in the name of their friendship.

But the Vulcan mind meld could only be performed between living people. Once the soul was detached from the body only the High Priestess could reach it. So if Jim Kirk was really dead, Spock couldn't contact him. He knelt, assumed the customary position, and tried to free his mind again.

Only darkness... blackness... distorted and grotesque images of faint light, and at the end... nothing. He opened his mind beyond that vastness and fell into a phosphorescent river that was flowing slowly to the fires of Hell.

He maintained his deep concentration, and the flames imploded into the whiteness of sickbay. The medical labs and the wards... A white dress... A bloody uniform... Were they McCoy's thoughts?

Spock tried to visualise the doctor's features: his amiable smile and impertinent voice; his bright blue eyes... Nothing. Suddenly he felt a violent pain. His breath quickened and he felt the blood oozing from his palms. His concentration lessened; he opened his eyes and looked down at his hands, and found them to be sweaty. The pain sharpened. He was sure those weren't McCoy's thoughts. A cry erupted into his mind, making him shudder, and he lost his concentration completely.

He stayed motionless for some moments, staring at the rock wall. There had been no mind meld, only memories, images from the nothingness of death. Thul had told him the truth. They were all dead.

He did not want to be sure. He wanted to hope again. His mind could make mistakes... He realised that he was trembling. He clenched his fists; he had to control himself. What was happening to his logical mind? A latent rage was insinuating itself into his heart. If Thul was right and he was the only survivor he must inform Starfleet. He must escape.

He did not want to be sure. He wanted to hope again...

Kirk was on the bridge during an emergency.

"Spock, help me! I'm your Captain... Your friend..."

He stretched out his hands to Spock, but the Vulcan seemed to be so far away, until he disappeared in a dark, heavy fog.

McCoy and Scotty... Faces distorted with pain and regret...

Voices, noises, cries... Bodies covered with blood, and a pungent smell of death.

"Dr. McCoy! Bones!"

Faces and places joined each other in an endless vortex. The voices resounded in his mind until they became a feeble murmur. At the centre of the vortex, a body. Spock's body. It was covered with a bloody Starfleet banner...

Kirk shrieked and woke up with a start. He was beaded with sweat, and he was panting. A dream. Only a dream.

In the darkness of his cell he thought he saw his officers. Instinctively he called to the First Officer in a low voice, but he did not receive an answer. Kirk rubbed his tired eyes and opened them again. It had been only a mirage. He covered his face with his hands.

My god! Then he cocked his head, rage and furious impotence

painted on his handsome face.

As he regained his strength the Maldhorians took him to dig in a deeper mine with a group of Andorian slaves. He tried to talk with them, but it seemed they did not understand him. Kirk realised that their minds were controlled.

He felt powerless and cheated. He, a Starfleet Captain, treated like a beast, chained and whipped like a pack animal! Any time he saw a Maldhorian he trembled with anger and hatred.

During the time he considered the night hours the guards shut him in the cell, and the tumult in his mind did not let him sleep. He passed those hours pacing back and forth in his dungeon, gritting his teeth and searching for a way to escape and contact his officers.

Commander Thul was sprawling in an armchair. The room was small, spartan in furnishing, and had a typically military appearance. The Maldhorian Empire's symbol was painted on the wall behind him.

The door opened with a crash. The chief jailer walked in, and Thul looked up with a sneer.

"What's happened?"

"The Human slaves will give us trouble," Thaor said firmly.

Thul narrowed his eye and his forehead wrinkled. "What did they do?"

"Someone rebelled violently. Humans are very close to each other, and they will not break their loyalty oath to the Federation." The jailer uttered the words in a hoarse, raucous voice.

Thul stared at him, his eye flaming with annoyance. "Who are separated?"

"The three senior officer, the Captain, the First Officer, and the Chief Surgeon."

Thul thought for a moment. "That is not enough. Keep them all separated - tell each he's the only survivor."

Thaor shook his head. "The trick hasn't worked with the Vulcan. We can tame the Humans, but not him."

"According to his records he's only half Vulcan. He's Kirk's friend. I've reserved a special treatment for him." Thul stood up. "Torture all the senior officers, including the Vulcan. Pain will block his telepathic faculties. And... bring me the doctor," he ordered, his eye hooded.

"It will be done," Thaor replied roughly, and headed for the door.

Two guards collected McCoy in his cell. The doctor stood up

with difficulty, but his spirit was still indomitable, and he tried to attack the jailers.

"Where are my friends?" he asked faintly.

A phaser against his back was the only mute answer he got, then they pushed him out.

McCoy muttered curses and dragged himself along the corridor, breathing hard. The nerve gas that the Maldhorians had used had broken any physical and mental resistance. It had acted like a drug.

He fell to his knees with a groan. He realised he had a couple of broken ribs, but he couldn't remember how he had broken them. The jailers aimed their weapons again, and McCoy rose slowly. There was fire in his eyes. Now he was walking only by the force of despair. A mute prayer accompanied his shuffling steps. The way to Thul's office was a real calvary.

The guards pushed him into the room. Commander Thul stared at him with a cold, arrogant expression. Before him was a weakened, dirty man in tatters. The Maldhorian pointed to a chair, into which McCoy dropped, barely restraining a moan of pain.

I must hold on to my dignity at all costs! Hatred flashed in McCoy's eyes, making them seem grey. He cocked his head with pride.

Thul recognised the intense hostility and aversion. "You were the Chief Surgeon aboard the Enterprise," he snarled, using the past tense on purpose.

Silence was the answer. With pride McCoy bore the fierce look coming from that sole eye.

Thul's rage exploded, and he seized the doctor by the shoulders, compelling him to turn to the monitor on the wall, and he flicked on a button.

A confused image appeared, then it became clearer, a big cavern where hundreds of filthy, sweaty slaves clad in rags were gathered. The guards who controlled them carried a phaser in one hand, a whip in the other.

McCoy closed his eyes, thinking about Hell. He shuddered, his pain mixed with deep disgust.

"Look!" Thul croaked.

McCoy caught a glimpse of a Starfleet uniform in the midst of the slaves, and his heart gave a sudden leap. "Jim!" he whispered, clutching the arms of his chair.

The images went on. Two guards took the man McCoy had recognised as Kirk, and dragged him roughly to a stone platform, where they chained him to a pole and whipped him.

"NO!" McCoy shouted with all his breath; the whip that the torturers were using had three-pointed hooks at its end. "Bastards! The doctor stood up, careless of the pain in his chest. "You damned..."

Thul grasped him and pushed him down again. "Look!"

Other images appeared on the screen. The jailers stopped whipping the Captain, untied him, and the tormented body collapsed face down. A Maldhorian turned him over with a kick.

James T. Kirk was dead. A rivulet of blood oozed from his half closed lips.

McCoy stared at the screen, his eyes wide. Tears of rage and grief blurred his sight. "Jim... Jim..." he murmured, horrified, but he had no strength to react.

The screen went off, then on again. The image changed. The bodies of other officers had been piled up one on another. Their uniforms were torn and bloodstained. The scene was a heart-rending one. McCoy felt his heart break at the terrible images he had just witnessed.

The camera panned round and stopped. "Spock!" McCoy gasped in a choking voice. The Vulcan's belly was ripped by a sword cut; his greenish blood had spattered the ground.

For a moment McCoy's mind went back in time to when Spock had been sitting at his science station, so formal, so cold. A wave of strength filled the doctor's heart.

"Spawn of the devil!" he shouted, and caught Thul by the neck, his bloodshot eyes bright with homicidal fury.

The Maldhorian dealt him a heavy blow and McCoy collapsed unconscious on the ground. The door opened and Thaor entered; he glanced briefly at the poor doctor, then looked quizzically at Thul, who gestured him to carry the Human away.

"Bring me Kirk!" Thul barked.

The Captain was digging when the jailers came to fetch him. He stared at them challengingly - they would have died if looks could kill. He glanced at the slaves nearest him, but everyone pretended not to see. Kirk threw the pick to the ground and followed them. The aimed phasers reminded him that it was the only thing to do. 'While there's life there's hope' was a very logical proverb; Spock had quoted it some time before.

The mine where he had been working was very deep. They caught the lift and stepped from it into a larger corridor. Kirk vaguely recognised the place; he realised that he was confused. Perhaps the Maldhorians could control his mind, or perhaps they simply used the nerve gas to nullify the prisoners' physical resistance and mental awareness. Then he smiled faintly. He was analysing the situation, so he was able to think clearly; at least now he was sure his mind wasn't controlled.

They arrived at a room and the guards pushed him inside. Kirk saw Thul, and his eyes brightened with fury.

"Where is my ship? You damned son of a bitch..."

The Maldhorian looked at him silently and switched on a viewscreen. He knew Kirk would be hard to convince. The monitor flashed, and images appeared. A horrifying view appeared before Kirk's eyes.

"Bones!"

Three jailers seized McCoy violently, tied him to a post and whipped him to death. Kirk felt his stomach turn over, while his blood was boiling with rage; his good friend was lying on the ground, uniform torn, flesh lacerated, his blood mixed with mud... Kirk shuddered, impotent and almost insane.

The images went on. One by one Kirk saw his dearest friends die, his officers, his companions, tortured, scourged, butchered. Scott, Chekov, Uhura, Spock... a pile of lifeless bodies. Kirk's face seemed carved in stone, rigid, as his heart broke.

The image changed rapidly and he saw what remained of the most beautiful Starfleet vessel. The Enterprise was a useless wreck.

For a moment Kirk feared for his sanity. His mouth opened, unable to utter a word, his heart was beating fast. The screen went dark and he stared at it, the same darkness filling his mind. He looked furiously at Thul.

"You murdered my officers! You damned pig!" It was the howl of an infuriated beast. Kirk threw himself at Thul like a panther. "My friends, my ship... You'll pay!" They were the words of a man who had nothing more to lose now.

The Maldhorian underestimated the Captain's strength and defended himself with difficulty until Thaor intervened. Only a phaser beam could stop Kirk's destructive wrath.

McCoy woke in his cell. The damp penetrated his bones, making him shudder. He felt as though drums were beating in his brain. He did not open his eyes, for he was afraid of seeing those images again. He hoped it was only a nightmare, but the frigid temperature and the damp were real. His stomach felt queasy and ready to throw up. The image of Jim's and Spock's deaths was impressed in his memory.

He had seen the wreck of the Enterprise in a hangar on Maldhor's surface. Thul would have tried to decode the information stored in the computer. He would not allow that! His friends were dead, killed by the Devil's son. He was alone, alone with his despair. All was lost.

"Spock, you wouldn't be able to solve this problem," he murmured. He didn't want to weep, but pain and rage overwhelmed him and firelike tears ran down his cheeks. They seemed to burn both his skin and his heart.

The doctor widened his eyes, staring into the blackness. The only way out was to take his own life and end it all. For a few moments he remained motionless, then the corners of his mouth curved in a faint, desperate smile. Before death he had a last duty, as a Starfleet officer and as a man - to push the self-destruct button. With the Enterprise the planet itself would be destroyed, and Thul's cruelty would not stain the galaxy with blood any more.

"Thul!" he cried at the dark, empty cell. ""You'll come to Hell with me!"

His smile became a sneer, and he burst into sobs. "Jim... Jim,

what would you have done?" he whispered, and gave way to bitter tears. A man and a Starfleet officer should not weep, but in that moment he felt himself to be neither.

"Even in the worst situation a man need not lose his dignity." Spock's words echoed in McCoy's mind.

"You're right, my friend," he murmured, and a wave of new strength filled his broken heart.

He heard approaching footsteps and drew himself up, ready to face Thul, restraining his sobs. The jailers passed his cell and went further on.

McCoy turned to the heavy door, staring at it. Now he was calmer. Something attracted his tired attention; he sank down and approached the door on all fours. He felt very weak, deprived of all reason for living. Panting for breath, he collapsed against the door and studied it intently. Iron strips were fixed to the wood, and one of these was loose. McCoy caught it, gathered all his waning strength, and gave a violent tug; he fell backwards, but the iron strip was in his hand.

He rubbed his aching neck and looked at the piece of metal with interest, smiling with satisfaction. It would be useful. He saw that there was a pale mark on the door; the guards would notice it. He gathered dirt from the floor and smeared it on the wood until the colour blended in.

McCoy concealed the strip of metal under the straw, staggered to his feet, and began to examine the walls of his cell; he had to orientate himself. There was a corridor to his left, and a corridor meant freedom. He began to tap the rock until he heard an echo. Fortune was helping him. He found a large crack, and knew where he must dig. He breathed deeply, and realised that the pain in his ribs had lessened.

McCoy lay down on the mattress. He needed sleep and rest, to recover his strength in order to escape and press the destruct button on the Enterprise. He studied the crack again, and a faint, bitter smile appeared on his exhausted face as he closed his eyes, sighing. It was a very small chance...

In San Francisco the sun was high in the sky when a young, black-haired woman entered the office of Commodore Abraham Nimrod. She wore the insignia of the Logistics Department, and held a file in her hand.

"Good morning, sir. These are the reports from the Starship class vessels," she said formally, and put the papers on his desk.

"Thank you," replied Nimrod, without raising his eyes.

The girl remained motionless before the desk, long lashes lowered over her shining blue eyes. Nimrod looked up, puzzled.

"What's wrong, Pyrol?"

"There is a problem, sir," answered the beautiful lieutenant, maintaining her formal expression.

"What is it?"

"I can't find Kirk's report, sir," she replied.

Nimrod frowned. "No report from Kirk? Do you mean you haven't prepared it, or that it didn't arrive?"

"It never arrived, sir. And..." she paused, "...what's worse is that we've had no news of the Enterprise for about two months."

"I see. Thank you, Lieutenant Pyrol, you may go."

Alone, the Commodore grimaced. He knew Kirk well. The Captain was a perfectionist in everything he did. Nimrod switched on the intercom.

"Captain Stanley Hassel, please," he said.

The screen flashed and a middle-aged man appeared.

"Stanley, I don't know what's brewing, but Kirk's in trouble."

The other officer narrowed his dark eyes. "You're right. I've been waiting for your call. I haven't the faintest idea where the Enterprise is. I've examined the recordings of Kirk's last report..."

"Well?"

"Kirk sent in a regular report exactly 59 days ago. He said they had met an unknown wreck with two survivors. He gave the coordinates. The meeting was in the Aries sector, and the nearest base is Starbase Three."

Nimrod rubbed his forehead, grimacing. "Okay. Call Commodore Mendez."

Stanley Hassel nodded and closed the communication.

Some minutes passed before Starbase Three was contacted, minutes during which Nimrod began to be really worried. A Starfleet vessel couldn't just disappear. And Kirk's Enterprise was special, somehow - Kirk and his crew were too expert...

The intercom buzzed, interrupting his thoughts. He switched it on, and Mendez' image appeared on the screen.

"Where the hell's the Enterprise?" Nimrod asked without greeting.

"You're asking me?" exclaimed Mendez. "I know less than you do. Hassel filled me in, but I know nothing more."

Nimrod shrugged. "There's been no news from the Enterprise for two months. I can't understand what happened. A vessel of that size can't disappear without trace"

Mendez clenched his jaw, worried. "I've got the Potemkin in orbit. I'll send her to check the last coordinates Kirk gave," he suggested.

Nimrod nodded and said, "Captain Nunez will have to make a systematic search. Kirk's coordinates are too near the Klingon

Empire for my liking."

"Do you think the Klingons have...?"

"I think nothing," Nimrod interrupted. "I just don't trust Klingons." But his voice sounded dull.

To McCoy, time seemed to blur. The Maldhorians had left him to vegetate in that foul cell, and Thul seemed to have disappeared. The doctor thought he was trying to decode the information from the ship's computer. When the Maldhorian grew tired of trying he would have McCoy tortured to discover the code, so he had to hurry. Time was flying. It was difficult for him to calculate how much time had passed since their capture... at least a month, maybe two. Anyway, he had spent the time in a useful way.

The doctor had been able to make a sort of lamp, using a flint he had chipped from the wall. A strip of his uniform became the wick. The grease on the soup the jailer gave him was inflammable, so he also had fuel.

The dig proceeded slowly. After a first very hard stratum he met a more friable rock. The narrow passage was now almost two metres long; he was sure that the direction was correct, and that it led to the corridor. He gritted his teeth and continued to dig day by day.

McCoy was certainly not lacking in ingenuity, in addition to being the best physician in Starfleet, and he learned to measure time roughly by using the length of the burning wick. Every nine wicks the jailer came to survey the cell and to bring him what he called 'mush'. During that time he dug in the passage, and when the ninth wick burned out he hurried on all fours back to his cell, where he covered the hole with a rock slab he had managed to detach from the wall.

This time, something went wrong. Perhaps he had counted the wicks wrongly, or their length was different, but he did not keep track of the time well. He was digging when he heard the guard approaching. McCoy blew out his lamp and crawled back to his cell, injuring his calf on a sharp projection of rock. He restrained a yelp of pain, crept into his cell, and covered the hole with the slab, just in time. He rested his shoulders against the wall and took a deep breath, concealing the bleeding wound with his hand as he pretended to sleep.

The guard entered, looked around and grunted something unintelligible, then he put the bowl on the ground and went out, slamming the door.

McCoy had followed his movements with half closed eyes, and let out a sigh of relief. He stared at the soup and grimaced with disgust. Still, he needed to eat to recover his strength. He examined the wound, which needed to be bandaged, remembering Kirk's statement, 'Extreme ills require extreme remedies.' He shredded his dirty tunic, tore his pants, and bound up the wound with the strip of cloth.

If Kirk had lost his arms he would have felt less pain. For

him the Enterprise was not a ship, she was his home, his partner, a sort of lover. She was all that, and more. Now he had lost her, and his officers were dead. McCoy, Scott, Sulu, Chekov, Uhura, all dead. His dearest friend had gone, too. Many people had mocked the friendship which tied him to Spock, but Spock was more Human than they could know.

Kirk sighed deeply and looked down at his scratched and bleeding hands. A Starfleet officer was not accustomed to a pick and shovel. He brooded over the future, day by day searching for a way to escape.

When the jailers had taken him to Thul's office he had seen a map, and had learned that the damned planet was located near the Klingon Empire, and seemed to have a strategic position.

Now that he had lost everything there was a last duty left, to discover if there was a connection between Maldhor and the Klingons. A suspicion had formed in his mind when he saw that map; perhaps their capture was the first act of war. The Klingons and the Maldhorians could be allies, arranging an invasion.

Day by day Kirk watched the changing of the guards. He had no way to measure time. Oh, if Spock were still alive!

From the moment the Maldhorians took him from the mine until they returned him to his cell he counted four changes of the guard. The number of jailers was never the same, five or eight Maldhorians stationed around the cavern to control the movements of the slaves. During the day - or rather, the work period - escape was impossible, unless he wanted to be killed.

The way from the mine to his cell varied, but every time they passed a big lift marked with a Maldhorian symbol. Kirk deduced it was a junction passage, for all the tunnels led to the lift.

While Kirk was considering his plan of escape a guard approached and raised his whip to hit him. The Captain felt his back burning. If his hazel eyes could have thrown flames the jailer would have been reduced to ashes.

"You'll pay for this, damned pig!" he cursed, gritting his teeth.

A slave beside him looked up at Kirk; perhaps he understood Standard.

On the 17th level Scott looked like an old-time steam engineer. He was counting his laddies; 23 were left, beside himself.

He took a deep breath. According to his rough calculation they had been in that stinking hole for 98 work turns, but what did that correspond to? A month? Two?

Scott had tried to talk to the jailers, but the only answer was an unintelligible grunting, and he gave up. His first and constant thought was escape. Unfortunately, fortune did not help them, and their attempt was in vain. Lt. Rod McLay had been injured, and from that moment controls were intensified, so that to organise another attempt was very difficult, almost impossible.

The situation changed when Thul showed him the scenes of Kirk's death, the deaths of the others, and the wreck of the Enterprise. He had kept the sorrowful secret for some days; his laddies knew from his face he was hiding something, and at last he told them everything.

"Now, we're alone. Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy and the others are dead. We must find a way to inform Starfleet."

But it was easier to say than to do it.

Time passed, and Scott bitterly racked his brains, but could find no solution to their tragedy. He glanced worriedly, with a father's concern, at McLay, who hadn't recovered, and sighed again. He walked away to his mattress and sank down on it, staring into the darkness for a moment before he took a sharp stone and made another notch on the wall behind him.

Ninety nine work turns. Ninety nine damned periods of slavery. Scott was filled with rage, and bowed his head on his knees. If there was a way to escape he would have found it by now... The images of Kirk's death returned to his mind, and his rage increased. Finally tiredness won, and sleep gave him a little peace.

Aboard the USS Potemkin Captain Geraldo Nunez was sitting in the command chair, watching the viewscreen as though it was a crystal ball - but he was no wizard. His vessel had reached the coordinates from which the Enterprise had sent in her last report.

Nunez ordered a scan of the whole area, but there was nothing to find in that cosmic desert, only a planetless white dwarf. If the Enterprise had collided with the star sensors would have picked up readings. One thing was certain - she had not been destroyed, and a heavy cruiser couldn't disappear into nothingness.

Captain Nunez sighed with frustration and turned to the science station. "Mr. Kendal, how far are we from the Klingon Empire?"

"Seventy point one three light years, sir," answered the young First Officer, after glancing at his monitor.

Nunez looked again at the screen. He remained silent for a few moments. It was a difficult decision he had to make, to go forward or to return home. It would be like a choice between life and death, between Kirk's life or death. The best Starfleet Captain... a legend... a hero...

"Helm," he said coolly, "course 71 mark 4, warp 6. Go to yellow alert. Tie in long range scanners. And.. inform Commodore Mendez," he ordered.

The helm officer looked at him and swallowed, hard. That course led to the Klingon Empire. Nunez returned the look, and nodded affirmatively. The officer turned to his station and inserted the new coordinates.

Lt. Kendal stood up and approached the Captain. "Do you think the Klingons attacked the Enterprise?" he asked in a low voice.

The Captain sighed, rubbing his chin. "Have you a better

idea? We have only a lifeless cosmic desert before us; the nearest solar system is very far from here."

"We're going into the wolf's den," insisted Kendal.

"I have no intention of crossing the border," replied Nunez.

The Potemkin sped through hyperspace towards the mortal enemies of the Federation. Despite his youth Captain Nunez had considerable experience, and that experience warned him to be very, very careful.

Some hours later the Potemkin halted some 50 miles from the boundary of the Klingon Empire when three K't'inga class heavy cruisers emerged from hyperspace. Nunez had expected something like that, and didn't lose heart. He ordered a channel opened to explain the problem to the suspicious Commander Khruth.

The Klingon, framed in the viewscreen, listened silently with a typical surly expression. When Nunez had finished he replied harshly.

"The Organian Treaty is still in force, and we have never violated it. None of our ships has crossed the border of the Empire, even if I would like to see Kirk and the Enterprise in Hell."

Nunez' green eyes became dark with anger. As the Klingon vessels raised their deflectors, the young Captain knew it was better not to insist. Anyway, Kendal's sensors picked up no suspect radiation.

The communication ended and the Potemkin reversed course. The Klingons did the same.

Nunez' report to Mendez was, "Search carried out. No sign of the USS Enterprise. We are coming back. Awaiting further instructions."

Thul was losing patience. He had an alliance with the Klingon and must solve the problem. Two months of hard captivity had not tamed the officers of the Enterprise. Time was running short, and soon the Klingon Admiral would return.

Kirk was proving a hard nut to crack, but Thul couldn't allow himself to destroy his mind. That damned Terran was too skilled a Starship Captain. He had to play his trump card. If Spock would not speak, he would be forced to use the terrible mindsifter.

Spock's mind was in a state of ferment. Vulcans were able to measure time using only their minds. He knew that 78 days, 7 hours and 34 minutes had passed since their capture. Three times he had tried in vain to create a link with Kirk's mind. He had tried to escape by deceiving the guard as he had done on Eminiar, but his plan failed. Unfortunately Thul was aware of his mental powers, and had used an android as his jailer. So Spock decided to use his strength, and had spent the last 24 days trying to unhinge the door of his cell; but it was too heavy even for a Vulcan. Nevertheless, he maintained absolute self control; logic dictated that he wait for the next opportunity.

Spock was lying motionless on his straw mattress, staring at the ceiling. From time to time the deep silence was broken by the faint noise of mice, that only he could hear.

That day his mediation was interrupted by heavy footsteps approaching. He thought the guard was bringing food. In the beginning the guards had given him a sort of soup with meat, which he refused to eat. Perhaps Thul had hoped to weaken him with hunger, but after the fifth day the guard brought vegetable soup. That confirmed his worst suspicions; Thul was doing everything to get to the information stored in the Enterprise computer, and he was the only key for getting it.

The bolt was drawn, and the door opened with a crash. Two jailers entered. "Get up!" one of the Maldhorians said, aiming his weapon.

The Vulcan obeyed silently.

"Come on!"

The guards roughly pushed him out of the cell. They walked along a corridor, then he was taken into a lift, Spock counted the levels as they went up. They stepped out four levels above. The guards led him into an office; he recognised it as Thul's headquarters.

Spock was left alone. He looked around, aware of a strange tiredness he had never felt before. He was moving to a chair when a blue file on the desk attracted his attention. He opened it, and glanced at the contents, which were enough to make the Starfleet Chief Admiral's hair stand on end. It was a detailed Klingon invasion plan. Maldhor was the Klingons' ally, and the planet was a rich source of dilithium.

There was a sudden noise and Thul entered. If Spock had been Human he would have started, but he kept his impassive expression and replaced the file before the Maldhorian could realise what he was doing.

Thul eyed him icily as he sat at his desk. "Your Captain is dead. All your crew are dead," he said after a moment.

Spock remained on his feet, rigid.

Thul switched on the wall screen. "Look!"

Images began to form. A cave, slaves digging with tools, picks and spades. Scenes of torture. The Enterprise officers chained and whipped. Disfigured faces, crushed bodies, cries of pain and desperate groans. Images to make the flesh creep. Spock's Human half shuddered with pain, his Vulcan half called for justice, and still his features remained impassive, his expression detached.

The screen flicked off, then on again. Two poles on a wet platform. Two lifeless bodies. Blood oozed from their wounds, mixing with blood. Dr. McCoy and Mr. Scott, tortured and ruthlessly murdered.

If Thul expected a furious reaction like Kirk's he was disappointed, but the Maldhorian reserved the most disgusting images for last.

"Do you remember every moment of your captivity?"

Thul's question reached Spock like a bolt from the blue. (The Vulcan confined himself to raising a quizzical eyebrow, folding his arms.

"Look."

The images went on. Two guards approached a man chained to a pole. It was James Kirk. His naked shoulders showed deep, bleeding wounds. They tore his clothes away completely, and their whips hit him again, ferociously.

Spock's face turned pale, but his expression remained cold. Thul watched him, and a sneer of satisfaction appeared on his sullen features.

Kirk was half unconscious now, his eyes rolled back in his head, a trickle of blood oozing from his lips.

Spock's dark eyes were sparkling coldly, lit with an unusual hatred.

The camera panned round and framed the entrance to one of the tunnels. Two jailers appeared from the dark passage and entered the cave; a tall, hooded and cloaked figure followed them. They headed towards the Captain.

The camera framed a close-up on Kirk. Blood mixed with sweat ran down his chest. His tormented face showed a terrible pain, but his hazel eyes were still bright with pride. He would never give up. Kirk's look conveyed to Spock his final plea.

I'm dying, and I entrust you with everything. Save the information in our computer - and save yourself.

A satanic look darkened Spock's noble features. The atavistic warlike spirit of Vulcan was winning against logic. He clenched his teeth, restraining the violent emotion that filled his heart.

Thul stared at him. The alien's illogical nature didn't understand that apparent indifference. His fiery eye would have frightened anybody, but Spock sustained that look with the force and dignity of a true Master of Kolihnar, even if he had not achieved initiation.

On the screen the images continued. The hooded figure stopped near the pole and removed his cloak, revealing his terrible intention. That man had pointed ears.

Kirk eyed him, dismayed. "What...? Why...? You... You're my friend..."

Spock couldn't avert his gaze from the screen. He remained motionless, witness to horror. An overwhelming sensation of nausea filled his stomach, and he felt a lump in his throat. His mind was flaming, unable to think, to believe what his eyes were watching. Cold sweat ran down his spine. Nausea changed to repulsion, repulsion to shame. He opened his mouth, but no word came out. Violent emotions exploded in Spock's heart, breaking all his resistance, but now he didn't want to resist any more. His soul was tumbling to Hell.

Dear god! What did I do?? But how? When? Where? I do not remember... What are Thul's powers? I cannot have done...

31

Commander Thul watched the First Officer's face; it seemed carved in marble, pale, an aura of grief on his features. The Maldhorian knew that he had won. He switched the screen off and on again.

The Enterprise appeared, intact, resting on the planet's surface in an enormous hangar. Then the viewscreen darkened.

Thul rose and approached Spock, facing him. The Vulcan was motionless, staring at nothing, terrified, his face rigid, his dark eyes lifeless, clouded, unseeing.

The alien grinned devilishly. "Now you know what you did!" he said in a savage tone.

Spock did not hear his words. He felt himself to be an abject creature, a worm. His dignity, his honour, were lost.

Thul called the jailers, who appeared some moments later. They pushed the prisoner out, and Spock allowed himself to be dragged away without offering any resistance.

Spock found himself back in the dimly lit cell. Unable to stand on his feet, he collapsed onto his knees, covering his face with both hands. Fear, hatred, impotence, self-loathing were crushing his logic.

Logic? What logic? There was no logic in what he had done. Thul had killed his logic. He was a worm. His worthiness was gone with Kirk. He felt hurt, betrayed, deceived. An uncontrollable wave of overpowering emotions flooded into his mind. He cocked his head and widened his eyes. As much as he tried he couldn't cancel from his mind the final image that Thul had shown him...

"What have I done?" he sighed. "I have damned myself. Thul drugged me and compelled me to... Oh god! Jim, I beg your forgiveness. Jim, my friend... You... you can never forgive me... I have... I... I do not remember... Is it possible that Thul had the power to overcome my control in that way? What kind of power has he? Oh god! Jim... T'hy'la..."

Spock realised he was trembling with rage. He couldn't be Vulcan any more. He couldn't be either a man or an officer any more. He was only a wretch. His eyes were burning, and he realised they were filled with tears. He was weeping.

A Vulcan could not cry! He tried to recover his self-control, and a sob lacerated his chest. This was what Humans called dishonour. Starfleet, the Enterprise, his friends... everything was lost. His dignity and his self respect had been obliterated. He had one last duty - to destroy himself. His life had no meaning any more.

"For what Thul made me do... I have no right to live. I have dishonoured myself and my dearest friend... I have killed Jim in the most disgusting way... I cannot allow myself to live one more day. What I have done is beyond any shame. I cannot live any more among either Humans or Vulcans. There will be no peace for my sin..."

Death was his only desire.

"I must die. If there is any honour left to me, I must commit suicide..."

Vulcans respected any life-form, and they could never commit suicide. Their education, their religion, their very nature considered it a crime. But Spock's Vulcan education was wavering. In his mind a horrid image pulsed like flames - Kirk, his Captain, his friend, lying sprawled face down on the floor of the cave, his blood streaming from dozens of wounds covering his entire body. And he, Spock of Vulcan, was the offender! His logic was lost. He did not remember his acts, he did not remember doing what he had done.

Spock knelt in the traditional posture, summoning up his mental energy. He joined his hands in a gesture almost of prayer. His eyes widened, staring at nothing. His mind began to remember...

V'ger, a wonderful, almost divine, mechanical being, searching for its Creator - illogical Man! He had been in touch with it, a perfect mind that did not know emotion.

A ghost called Khan Noonian Singh - and a terrible battle to death.

Death... it attracted him with bewitching force...

And his life from Genesis, thanks to his Human friend James T. Kirk.

A black sky over this name. His mind was bewildered...

At that moment Leonard McCoy was asking himself if he had taken the wrong direction in digging his tunnel. It was almost three metres long, and now it was too late to go back. He had to go forward at all costs.

Dust and damp seared his throat, and he coughed, wiping his forehead with what remained of his uniform. His beard was long, shaggy and dirty. He shuddered, feeling sticky - he hadn't had a bath for months. He sighed, and continued to dig with grazed hands. He made his last effort and pushed with his makeshift tool against the stone which blocked his way, pushing it with the last of his strength.

"Dammit!" he exclaimed, panting.

Beyond the rock wall Spock heard a faint noise, like that caused by metal on stone, and his concentration lessened. His eyes began to focus, and he peered into the darkness. There was nothing. The noise became louder. Spock drew himself up and steadily watched the wall before him. A rock slab was moving slowly. He frowned, ready to face anything with the determination of a man who has nothing more to lose.

The slab slid aside, and a filthy, bearded Human crept out of the hole.

McCoy coughed again and remained crouched on the ground. He looked up at Spock and felt a surge of adrenalin in his veins. He jumped, unable to believe what he was seeing. A ghost? or a real

Vulcan?

"My god!" he whispered.

Spock didn't recognise him at first, and stared at the man hesitantly. His voice... He had heard that voice before... It was... McCoy! It was impossible, beyond logic.

"Dr. McCoy!" he exclaimed feebly, and bent down to help him up.

The doctor seized Spock's hands and squeezed them, as though making sure he wasn't a ghost. "Spock!" he murmured faintly, and his blue eyes dimmed with tears of joy.

"Bon... McCoy!" The Vulcan's voice was also a murmur. Somehow it was very difficult to restrain emotion. Spock felt his throat dry, and words failed him.

The doctor smiled and hugged him. "Damn you, Spock..."

The Vulcan remained motionless for a moment, but a feeling of relief filled his mind and he returned McCoy's hug with embarrassment. His desperate heart was seeking a streak of light after such deep grief.

McCoy coughed again, grimacing at the pain in his chest. He was exhausted. Spock recovered his self control and helped him to sit down on the straw bed, resting his back against the wall, then sat down before him.

"Doctor, how did you find me?"

McCoy opened his eyes and his lips curved in a small, tired smile. "Why don't you ask me why I'm alive?" he said with his usual irony, notwithstanding the tears blurring his eyes. "I missed you."

Spock sighed, nodding, and a faint smile lit up his face. Perhaps there was hope for him...

"I dug like a mole, and instead of finding freedom I found another cell - and you," McCoy said.

McCoy was alive. Perhaps Jim... and he didn't... he couldn't remember...

The doctor looked at him with affection as he realised that Human emotions were getting the upper hand over Spock's Vulcan half.

"If you are alive, perhaps the scenes Thul showed me were false," said the First Officer, trying to exorcise his dangerous feelings. "Perhaps Jim himself is alive..."

McCoy scrutinised Spock's face; never before had he heard such anxiety in the Vulcan's voice. He swallowed.

"That damned son of a bitch also showed me... our officers... all dead. Jim, too."

McCoy coughed violently, and the Vulcan supported him, with a worried expression. "You are very tired," he said, helping the doctor to lie down on the mattress.

McCoy shook his head, panting. "I'm ill..." he whispered,

breathing heavily. "I have two broken ribs and... bad bronchitis..." He clutched at the Vulcan's arms. "We must escape... discover if the others are still alive..."

Spock nodded and held him down, feeling his heart rate increase.

"... but if they are really dead...?" McCoy continued hoarsely.

"If Jim is still alive... or if I really..." Spock did not finish the sentence, and McCoy eyed him quizzically. "The Enterprise seems intact in a hangar on the surface," he continued.

"She's destroyed," replied the doctor wearily.

"No," said Spock. "Thul deceived you again."

McCoy cursed in a low voice.

"If the others are all dead..." Spock paused, his voice trembling, "I cannot pilot the ship alone. Escape is impossible."

McCoy drew himself up, leaning on one elbow. "What do you mean? What's happened to you?" he asked firmly.

Spock did not answer. McCoy stared at his dark, alien eyes with a mixture of worry and curiosity. A terrible anger flamed in those eyes; McCoy understood that Spock was fighting an internal battle - but why?

"What have you discovered?" McCoy insisted.

Spock recovered his usual calm expression. "In Thul's office I saw some writings in Klingonese... Klingon and Maldhor are allies, planning an invasion.... This planet is a treasure house of dilithium. My last duty is to destroy... "

Spock spoke slowly, with many pauses. The doctor knew well that was not his normal way of speaking. He remained silent for moment.

"Spock, tell me the truth. What happened?"

The Vulcan stared at him mutely. "I... I prefer not to speak of it."

"Of what? Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

Spock remained silent: McCoy knew that he would speak only if he wished to do so.

"Spock, has anyone ever told you that look gives you a more Human air?"

Under normal circumstances McCoy's irony would have annoyed the Vulcan, but now the doctor saw him smile, and congratulated himself that he had succeeded in relieving the tension in Spock. Then he realised that that was another sign that something bad had happened.

He shivered with fever. Spock looked at him worriedly, took off his shirt and covered his companion; he could stand the cold,

McCoy could not.

The doctor slept for five hours. When he woke the fever was gone, but he felt very weak. He raised his head and looked around. Spock was crouched on the ground, eyes closed, wearing only his black T-shirt and trousers. Vulcan was a warm planet, and he was not accustomed to cold temperatures.

"Spock!" McCoy called in a low voice. "Spock! You're risking becoming ill."

The First Officer opened his eyes tiredly, and saw McCoy handing him his uniform shirt. He shook his head.

"Put it on, Doctor. You are in more need than I am."

McCoy nodded, and pulled the shirt around his shoulders. "Do you have a plan?"

The Vulcan stared at him hesitantly; he had never before seen such an expression in Spock's eyes. "We have to wait for guards to pass near. I will try to reach them," he answered after a long moment of silence.

McCoy saw death, then a flash of challenge in Spock's eyes, very unusual for him. The Vulcan was on the verge of a fit of nerves.

"We must escape. We must do everything possible to thwart their invasion plans," McCoy said resolutely.

It seemed his words didn't reach Spock's ears. McCoy realised that his heart and mind were confused and far away. What had Thul done to him?

Their wait lasted for a short time, then they heard heavy footsteps approaching. The doctor stood up, glancing questioningly at Spock, and he nodded affirmatively; his face looked tense, strange.

Was it the right moment? The Vulcan hoped it was. His only impulse was to flee his sin. He rested his hands on the stone wall, beginning to concentrate. His telepathic mind had difficulties. He channelled his mental energy into a dark vortex of violent, illogical emotions. The jailers' feelings burned in Spock's mind in cruel images of war and horror.

Then... he touched them.

In the corridor two Maldhorians became aware that something was happening in the Vulcan's cell, and quickened their pace.

Spock detached his hands from the wall, murmuring inaudible words, and McCoy hurried to shake him from the mind meld. The First Officer widened his eyes.

"They are barbarians!"

"Yes, I know. They're coming..."

McCoy was interrupted by the creaking door, which was opening.

Spock shook his head slowly and recovered his control at once, gesturing to him to keep silent; then with a feline motion he hid behind the door.

The doctor obeyed and drew back slowly; his weakness wouldn't allow him to become involved in a hand-to-hand fight. Then he saw the iron bar he had used to dig, and he had an idea. He seized it, and waited.

Moments later two Maldhorians entered the cell, facing the doctor, who raised the bar and struck the first guard with all his strength. Spock moved rapidly, and the second guard collapsed to the ground with a groan.

"Why didn't you try to escape before?" McCoy asked, and coughed, doubling over with the effort.

"I did try four times before... before I... Hurry up!" Spock avoided McCoy's questioning eyes, picked up the guards' phasers, and gave one to him, then checked to see if the corridor was empty. It was - no alarm had been raised.

McCoy rested his shoulders against the open door and breathed deeply.

"Do you think you can make it?" Spock asked coldly.

McCoy eyed him, his face pale. "If I tell you I can't, would you stop for me?" he replied with a distressed smile, then realised it would have been better not to have asked that - he had the feeling Spock wanted to give himself up.

The Vulcan supported him with an arm. "When we reach the Enterprise I'll give you an injection of Salburathol," he said, and moved forward. The doctor followed him silently.

They sneaked carefully and warily along the corridor as far as a lift; the insufficient illumination gave the walls a strange greenish luminescence. The sound of their footsteps echoed dangerously.

McCoy was exhausted and out of breath. "Do you know the right direction?" he asked in a murmur.

Spock looked at the lift resolutely. "Have you never heard of intuition?" he replied as the door opened.

They entered and Spock pushed the last button while helping McCoy to stand on his feet.

"Your Human half can be useful - sometimes." McCoy paused. "I hope the guards don't discover our escape."

"That is a calculated risk. You Humans like to believe in good luck."

Spock had spoken in a calm voice, but his expression was a mask of helpless hatred and badly concealed anxiety.

Finally the lift stopped and they stepped out into the hangar where the Enterprise was. Spock had taken a risk and won - at least partially.

The hangar was an enormous transparent dome. McCoy widened his eyes, amazed, and choked back a curse. All was silent. The Enterprise was surrounded by four high pylons. Large strips of an unknown material were holding the ship so that the keel did not touch the ground, but hung suspended a few metres from the floor.

"How did they do that?" the doctor asked.

Spock shook his head. "Theoretically it is impossible. I don't know how..."

His words were interrupted by a deafening klaxon sound. McCoy pressed his hands to his ears.

"They got us!"

The Vulcan looked around. There was nowhere to hide in that vast hangar.

"We must reach the ship." He pointed decisively to the Enterprise.

"How do we get aboard?" McCoy asked, limping after him.

"Through one of the stern hatches," Spock answered curtly. "I'm sorry, Doctor," he added, and with a rapid movement took McCoy on his shoulders and dashed off towards the ship.

McCoy's weight slowed his desperate run, and then two Maldhorians appeared, aiming their phasers.

Spock stumbled, and the doctor noticed an expression on his face he had never seen before, one of hatred and despair, an expression the Vulcan was trying to repress. Spock fired without giving the Maldhorians time to react, then he rose again, supporting McCoy. He strode forward and fired again, killing another three guards who had appeared on their right. McCoy had observed him many times, but Spock had never looked so Human, so hopeless.

They reached the Enterprise's stern hatch, and Spock took a magnetic key from his belt. McCoy wondered where he had found it, but the Vulcan anticipated his question.

"I found it in Thul's office. I thought it would be useful."

Spock set the key with the Enterprise code, and the hatch opened. Spock stepped inside and pulled McCoy with him. The doctor restrained a groan.

"Thank you," he whispered, closing his eyes at the pain in his ribs as he collapsed to the floor.

The Vulcan nodded, and silently closed the hatch, sealing it again. Now they were safe.

The alarm did not sound in the mines.

Captain Kirk was ready. He had a detailed plan, and was waiting for the right occasion to use it, sure that he could make it. He must make it, for himself and for his officers. He was alone, without a ship, without a future. No! He had a future. He

remembered his Vulcan friend's words. 'Every problem has its solution.' Escape became his obsession.

Kirk's brain was racing with sad thoughts of death. He hit the rock with his pick angrily, furious, so furious that he would have killed a Maldhorian had he been free to move, but chains hampered his movements. Beads of sweat were on his brow and ran down into his hazel eyes until his sight grew dim. He wiped his face with his arm and cursed, then stared to dig again, casting a flaming glance at a guard.

A bell rang. The shift was over. The jailers began to unchain the slaves, then took them towards the exit through a long corridor. Kirk was pushed out with the others.

Suddenly one of the prisoners stumbled and collapsed onto the muddy ground. The column stopped. The guards rushed up, beating the slave. Someone started a brawl. Groans mixed with shrill cries and whippings as bodies crowded together in a big, noisy mob.

This was the moment he had been waiting for. Kirk freed himself from the throng, then looked around and slipped silently away from the group, then ran into secondary passage.

One of the guards realised what was happening and followed him with a phaser. Kirk couldn't risk the fire. He hid round a corner and waited, then leaped out and knocked the Maldhorian down. He looked at the alien lying face down on the ground; he had killed him. The force of his hatred and despair had made him want to kill.

Shaking off a feeling of death that was overwhelming him he took the phaser and fled through a lateral tunnel. He ran for all he was worth towards the unknown until he reached a lift. His mind, his heart, were flaming. He felt like Lazarus, rising again from Hell, come back to avenge his friends' deaths. He was upset, terribly resolute, and miserably ready to face anything.

Kirk took the lift and pressed the last button; it went up three levels. He stepped out and two guards barred his way. He fired, pitiless, without batting an eyelid.

The ground rang under his feet. The lights were very faint. It seemed to him as though a whole city had been built underground. Perhaps some catastrophe had made life on the surface impossible. A pungent musty smell suffocated him. He was panting, and stopped before the first door he came to. It looked like one of the dungeon cells... He aimed the phaser and fired; an opening appeared in the door.

A filthy, tattered man was crouching on the ground, wide-eyed. Kirk recognised the red uniform, and felt the adrenalin surge in his veins.

"Scotty!" he murmured; his voice was broken, his heart throbbing with astonishment.

The engineer stared at him, dumbfounded. "Jim... JIM! Oh god!" Tears brightened his dark eyes. He stood up slowly, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Kirk approached the man, his handsome features losing their hardness, his lips curved in a sun-like smile. His heart was singing now. The shadow of Death had disappeared in his mind.

The two men hugged each other. They no longer looked like brilliant, charming Starfleet officers; they were filthy, ragged, unkempt. But now, courage had returned. Kirk felt full of spirit; now there was hope again.

"My god... Scotty... I can't believe..." he whispered.

The engineer squeezed Kirk's arms, as though to have proof he was not dreaming. "Jim... I... we thought you were dead!" His voice was broken with emotion.

Kirk eyed him quizzically. "We? What do you mean, we?" he asked, releasing Scott.

"The Maldhorians separated us. I'm with 24 of my boys. I know many of the officers are still alive. Uhura, Chekov, Sulu, Kyle and DeSalle are shut in cells in this corridor."

Hope lit Kirk's eyes. "And Spock? McCoy?" he asked anxiously.

The engineer looked at the ground, shaking his head desolately. "Thul killed them," he said dismally. "I saw..."

Kirk felt his heart breaking. He was shocked. He had hoped... He had wanted to hope... Perhaps he had fooled himself with vain hopes, and that hope had helped him to survive. In his mind his son's words rang.

'You never faced death; you always cheated it.'

David was right. And still he managed to get through the Genesis tragedy, and Spock returned from the Kingdom of Shades. And now he had lost him again, with another dear friend. His best officers, his closest friends, were gone forever.

Kirk took a deep breath and swallowed bitterly. His crew were alive; now, he had to care for them.

"Can you follow me?"

The engineer nodded, and seized the phaser Kirk was handing him. "I'll follow you to Hell, Captain."

They ran along the corridor and one by one they opened the cells. The warm voices of his officers gave Kirk courage. He tried to count them, but he couldn't. He was too happy to see their faces, to hear their laughter. Uhura burst into tears as she saw him, and ran into his arms.

Chekov grinned, understanding. "Keptin... Keptin... we are all alive," he said. "The Maldhorians put other Humans in the upper levels. I heard a guard speaking Standard... He mentioned the Enterprise."

Kirk's eyes clouded, and he frowned. "She's destroyed."

Sulu shook his head. "No, Captain. Chekov and I saw something unbelievable. Maldhor has no atmosphere, and Thul put our ship into a hangar on the surface. She's intact."

There was a murmur of amazement. Kirk and Scott exchanged a look.

"That's impossible!" Kirk said harshly.

Scott rubbed his forehead. For a moment the only sound was his breathing. "Technically... Technically possible, but very dangerous." His voice was thick.

Kirk glanced at him, then ordered, "Hurry up! We must get out of here. If the Enterprise is intact, we must find her."

Kirk pointed to the end of the corridor and strode on. His mind was in ferment. Feelings of despair and faith were warring inside him. He willed himself not to think; now he must only act, and act well. They were on the razor's edge.

They walked rapidly to freedom, but suddenly a wall of energy blocked the way, and the piercing wail of the alarm rent the air. Two guards appeared facing the Captain, and he fired without hesitation.

"Separate and find the others!" he shouted, and ducked behind a corner, phaser ready.

The officers scattered and disappeared in the dark passage like shades among the fog. Scott remained at Kirk's side.

"I gave my weapon to Sulu," he said.

Kirk nodded, watching attentively, but no-one came. He gazed beyond the energy wall to the lift.

Scott looked up, searching for something. "Jim!" he called, pointing to a box on the ceiling. "There!"

Kirk raised the phaser and fired. The box exploded and the energy wall dissolved into sparkles. They ran on, and Scott picked up the weapon of a dead guard.

"Hurry up!" Kirk exhorted.

When they reached the lift the door opened and a group of jailers stepped out, phasers aimed.

Commodore Mendez had known Kirk for twenty years, and when he received the message from the Potemkin he was dumbfounded. Kirk wasn't the type to cheat or deceive, so the Klingons were the only explanation; but he couldn't risk starting a war, especially after the Genesis tragedy.

He looked out of the window of his office on Starbase Three. The planet's sun was setting, and the far snow-capped mountains sparkled, reflecting the last of the reddish sunbeams. The sky was changing colour, the vivid blue fading to violet as the sun slid below the peaks.

Mendez sighed, then returned to his desk and switched on the intercom.

"Lt. Fairchild, send this message to Starfleet Command." He sat down, paused, then began to dictate tonelessly. "From Sector 11, Starbase 3. Recording the disappearance of the USS Enterprise, NCC 1701-A, Captain James T. Kirk commanding. Last message received

stardate 2739.4. USS Potemkin sent to investigate, search results negative. On my order, Potemkin remains in area continuing patrol. Reports from Captain Nunez and Commodore Nimrod accompany this. Signed, Commodore Jose I. Mendez." He restrained another sigh. "Send it Code 3 and Priority 1."

The young woman framed in the viewscreen on his desk nodded, trying to conceal her amazement. "Aye, sir."

The Commodore switched off the intercom and went to look again at the sky. Darkness had fallen, and stars twinkled against a black tapestry. He had always liked that view, but tonight it wrung his heart. The sky seemed threatening. He ran his hands through his hair, grimacing.

"Kirk's got himself into a mess again. He seems to do it on purpose."

Spock carried McCoy to sickbay, where he injected a stimulant which worked immediately. The doctor was lying on a diagnostic bed, and the Vulcan was at his side, reading the scales on the panel above him.

"A physician now, are you?" asked McCoy with an amused expression in his blue eyes.

Spock kept silent for a few moments, then he looked at him sternly. "Soon you will feel better."

"Thank you, 'Doctor'!" McCoy grinned.

The Vulcan didn't seem to appreciate his irony and strode out. In the doorway he stopped without turning round.

"I am going to the bridge. Do not move till I call you," he said curtly and went out, leaving McCoy alone.

The Chief Medical Officer followed him with his gaze until he was out of sight. Spock's behaviour was very strange, unusual and emotional. McCoy had tried to understand him, in vain. What was weighing on Spock's mind? He remained staring at the point where the Vulcan had disappeared, while he began to feel his strength coming back.

Commander Spock walked carefully through the empty corridors of the ship. He didn't meet any Maldhorians; perhaps he and McCoy were the only two aboard. But it was better not to take chances.

He noticed that the instruments were intact and working; evidently the Maldhorians had not managed to deactivate the main circuits.

The turbolift took him to the bridge, where the lights were dimmed. Spock moved immediately to his own console, sat down, and switched on the internal sensors to search for alien presences, but they registered only himself and McCoy. He punched other buttons, his thin fingers moving rapidly on the board; then he stopped, realising that he was perspiring. He remained motionless, staring at nothing, trembling.

The lift doors opened behind him and McCoy stepped onto the bridge, staggering. The doctor leaned his shoulders on the wall, staring at him, puzzled.

"What did Thul do to you?" he asked point-blank.

Spock started, and turned slowly, his face very pale. "The... the Klingons... No, I'm fine... I'm fine now," he muttered hesitantly.

McCoy scrutinised him mutely, and felt his hair stand on end; a diabolical expression distorted the Vulcan's features.

"Spock, tell me the truth. How do you feel?" he said gently, and approached the Vulcan, who got to his feet, clenching his teeth.

"I am fine now, Doctor. I ordered you to stay in sickbay, and you must stay down there!" he said in a harsh tone.

McCoy eyed him without uttering a word, and the Vulcan avoided that searching look. He moved away and checked the engineering station, then sat down and began to work rapidly on the console.

McCoy continued to stare at him, speechless. Spock was... going mad? Mad? He approached him, and stopped at his side.

"Spock," he said calmly, "we have shared many difficult situations. We shared Genesis..."

"An ill-fated accident," Spock interrupted him without raising his dark eyes from the console.

"Call it what you want, but we shared many troubles. Spock, in the name of the friendship we share with Jim, what happened? What did they do to you?"

Silence. The Vulcan felt a sense of relief. McCoy's words were leading him to tell of his misdeed. The word 'friendship' had a strange sound for him; it gave him a shameful peace. He had no right to it. He bowed his head, closing his eyes. He had dishonoured that sacred word.

"Spock, you and I saw Jim dying, and the others, but... you saw something else. What was it?"

The First Officer looked up; new lines around his eyes showed his deep tiredness. "Doctor, there are things we cannot share."

McCoy bent over him and grasped his arm. "So there is something else. If you tell me you'll feel better. Some years ago I told you that a release of emotion can be healthy."

The Vulcan freed himself from McCoy's hold and looked down at the console, keeping a distant and enigmatic expression on his face that increased McCoy's worry. "Some years ago I also replied that sometimes the release of emotion is not useful."

McCoy remained silent. Something had changed in Spock, something indefinable.

"Doctor," continued the Vulcan in a dull voice, "we have no chance of escape. I cannot pilot the ship alone. Soon the Maldhorians will beam here. I have raised the shields, but I doubt

they will hold. The engines are cold, and cannot produce enough energy. Once we used a dangerous chemical formula to start them, but Mr. Scott helped me. Now Scott is dead. Doctor, we are dying."

McCoy swallowed, and felt his muscles become numb. The Vulcan did not deign to look at him, but stood up and went to the communications station; miserably he sank into the chair and switched on the subspace radio.

"This is the last report of the USS Enterprise, First Officer Spock speaking. The survivors aboard the alien wreck were Maldhorians. They used nerve gas to render the crew unconscious and take possession of our ship. They brought us down to Maldhor and kept us in underground cells. All the senior officers and crew have been killed; only the Chief Medical Officer and I have survived. I have discovered that the Klingons are allied with Maldhor, and they have formulated a plan of invasion. Maldhor is an enormous mine of dilithium, and a dangerous Klingon outpost in Federation territory. The date of the invasion is set for stardate 8807.4. Our last duty is to stop them. The ship is not functional. I intend to set the self-destruct sequence."

Spock's voice held no inflection. McCoy stared at him; stardate 8807.4 was only four days away. He sat down on a step as the Vulcan pushed another button on the console

"Computer."

"Working," replied the metallic voice.

"Security procedure. Access to self-destruct code."

"Identify for retinal scan."

"Commander Spock, First Officer, Science Officer. Security class A1."

The small monitor facing him flashed in a range of vivid colours, reproducing his eyes' pattern.

"Identified."

"Record the death of Captain James T. Kirk. Captain Spock in command. Emergency operative." The Vulcan spoke tonelessly.

"Emergency operative. Death of Captain James T. Kirk recorded."

"This is Captain Spock. Destruct sequence. Code one, one A, two B."

"Code verified and correct. Destruct sequence entered."

"Countdown three minutes. Code zero zero zero destruct zero."

"Countdown has begun," replied the computer.

"How long do we have?" McCoy asked.

Spock did not answer; it was an illogical question. The doctor did not protest, but gestured to him to sit down beside him. The First Officer shook his head and remained standing. The two remained motionless, gazing at the main screen, while the faint

tic-tac of instruments echoed in that air full of inconsolable memories and helpless rage.

"Three minutes before the end," McCoy whispered, burying his face in his hands.

Spock looked down at him, and felt an unusual sympathy for the man.

Suddenly McCoy cocked his head and eyed him. "Now that we're going to die, you must tell me the truth."

Spock avoided McCoy's gaze and turned away. "I have performed my last duty. The explosion of the Enterprise will destroy Maldhor. I have done my duty, though I am no longer an officer... or a man."

McCoy frowned without understanding. "What do you mean?"

Spock remained silent.

"What do you mean?" McCoy insisted gently.

Silence again.

"I saw Jim dying..." Spock's voice was a whisper.

"So did I. Jim was a great Captain."

Silence again.

"I... raped him."

McCoy looked at him for a long moment, unable to believe what he had just heard. "What?"

"I raped..." Spock could not finish the sentence.

McCoy stood up. "Spock, are you mad? I can't believe you could have done something like that."

The Vulcan remained turned away, staring at the darkened main screen. "It is true, Doctor. The Maldhorians made me... They drugged me... and somehow they forced me... I had no recollection of the act until... until Thul showed me a tape..."

His face showed all the strain he was going through. Even his Vulcan control could not bear the pain, the shame of having to tell McCoy what he had done. His mind, his soul, were in turmoil.

The doctor felt a surge of adrenalin as he faced the Vulcan. Their eyes met, but Spock could not bear McCoy's gaze. The doctor put a hand on the Vulcan's shoulder.

"Spock... Oh my god, Spock!"

They remained silent for some moments.

"Spock, I understand. I understand how you feel about that." McCoy paused, seeking the right words. "No words can ever heal your wound. I can only tell you this: it was not your fault. You were not responsible. They drugged you."

"But you cannot understand, Doctor. I was the instrument of his death!" Spock said explosively. His eyes flamed with anger.

McCoy's eyes were filling with tears; he tried to hold them back.

"My god!"

Meanwhile, on the 18th level, the fighting continued. The Maldhorians managed to block Kirk and a group of 24 officers in a blind tunnel. The Enterprise crew was battling for freedom, and it was a real fight to the death.

Kirk did not lose heart. He aimed his weapon and fired, killing the aliens in the first line. Scott leaped forward and picked up a phaser; Kyle pounced on a guard and cut his throat with cold determination.

Swords crossed and sparkled. Blood dripped, mixing with mud and dust. Courage and despair were painted on the faces of officers sorely tried by long days of slavery in the dreadful mines.

Kirk fought like a lion, phaser in one hand, a dagger in the other. He had to break through the enemy front rank, and ran at them, shouting with rage.

The group overwhelmed the jailers and reached another passage. Kirk went on carefully, with his phaser set ready to kill. Two guards appeared, their eyes shining cruelly. For a long moment the two sides faced each other silently, with a mutual hatred; then everything ended. Kirk fired, then ran to the lift, followed by his officers.

They emerged in a wide cavern where they found Chekov with another group of officers, who clustered around Kirk. There was no time for small talk or greetings; they moved along the corridor to Thul's office without meeting any guards.

Kirk entered, his face dark. "This is where that bastard showed me fake scenes of your deaths." He pointed to the screen on the wall.

In the corridor fighting broke out again as jailers reached them. Sulu took hold of a Maldhorian and felled him with a karate blow. Inside the office, Scott approached the console and studied it attentively.

"Jim, this computer controls the whole network of galleries. Some of them are surrounded by magnetic fields."

Kirk grimaced. "We must find the other crew members." The Captain's voice was firm, and a strange light flashed in his hazel eyes.

The Chief Engineer understood that he was referring to Spock and McCoy. He flicked a lever, and the alert lights on the console began going out one by one.

"Damn you, Kirk! I'll stop you!"

Thul's voice sounded behind them, and they jumped.

Kirk did not hesitate. The Maldhorian commander was aiming a gun at them. He fired, and Thul dissolved into nothingness.

On the bridge Spock and McCoy silently followed the countdown with hopeless resignation.

Bip... bip... It was a signal from the sensors.

Spock turned and hurried to his station. He could not believe what he was watching - Human life-form readings registered on the small screen.

"It must be our crew!" exclaimed McCoy in a voice broken by emotion. He turned back to the chronometer and shouted, "Spock! The countdown! Eighteen seconds left!"

The Vulcan hurried to the communications station and pushed a button. "Computer, abort destruct sequence. I am Captain Spock. Repeat, abort destruct sequence. Code zero zero zero one zero."

Some small lights faded and the chronometer stopped. "Destruct sequence aborted," said the cold voice of the computer, but to McCoy it sounded wonderful. He started breathing again.

"Let's get to the transporter. Whoever they are, we'll beam them up," said Spock, running to the turbolift.

McCoy followed him, pressing a hand against his back as he grimaced at the pain.

"And the coordinates?"

"Inserted."

They ran like the wind for the empty transporter room.

On Maldhor, in Thul's office, the wall behind Kirk slid open. He heard a faint sound and turned suddenly, just in time to see Rhav raise his sword. The blow struck Kirk's shoulder, and he collapsed to the ground in a pool of blood.

Sulu entered the room, uttered a cry, and hurled himself on the Maldhorian, using all the skills of an ancient samurai. A few violent blows and the helmsman had the better of the alien; a knife plunged into Rhav's chest.

Scott was bending over Kirk, trying to stop the bleeding.

"Spock... Don't worry, this is nothing." Kirk's voice was faint but firm. "We need to find Spock and McCoy."

The engineer nodded. At that moment they heard the familiar sound of the transporter, and a shining column of light enveloped them.

Twenty-two people appeared on the platform of the transporter room. Everybody was filthy, ragged and unkempt, but incredulous and

happy. Scott was supporting Kirk; the Captain's head was hanging, his uniform bloodstained.

"Spock... Bones... Good heavens!" exclaimed Scott, and his voice rasped.

Kirk opened his eyes slowly, looking for his Vulcan friend. Despite the unbearable pain coming from his shoulder he held out his hand to Spock, who froze.

The Vulcan's mind flamed. Pain, sorrow, regret, shame filled his soul. For a long moment he did not hear the jubilant voices around him. His dark eyes clouded and met Kirk's. Thank god! His Captain, his friend, was alive!

McCoy looked at both of them and understood what was happening in Spock's mind. He did not hesitate, but hurried to Kirk, kneeling beside him and waving the tricorder over his body. The sensors showed only a superficial wound.

"Bones..."

The doctor shook his head. "Keep still!" he ordered, stauching the flow of blood.

Spock was rigid, motionless, fighting a terrible internal battle. Too many emotions were attacking his logical mind.

The room was in chaos around him. Scott rushed to the console and as he began to operate the buttons, other people appeared on the platform. Sulu and Uhura ran for the lift, shouting to Chekov to follow them.

Kirk soon recovered his strength, thanks to the powerful stimulants with which McCoy had injected him.

"Kyle, DeSaille, beam everyone up, and hurry! Scotty, go to the engine room. McCoy, you help the wounded," the Captain ordered curtly, and turned, looking for Spock, but he could not see him. He thought he must be on the bridge, and ran for the turbolift.

Some moments later Kirk was again in his place, seated in the command chair on the bridge. He felt as though he had returned to Paradise - the Enterprise was his personal heaven. In his heart happiness and relief mixed with anger and fear. When Thul had told him that the Enterprise had been destroyed something had died within him; when the Maldhorian had told him his officers had been killed he had felt grief wring his heart. Now he was born again.

A violent jolt interrupted his thoughts.

"Captain, they're attacking us!" Sulu shouted.

"Damn them!" cursed Kirk as he pushed a button on the arm rest. "How many people are aboard?" he asked abruptly.

"Three hundred and thirty six, sir. All transporters are working. There are many injured but I think we've got all the survivors. We can't detect any more Human readings." Kyle answered breathlessly.

The intercom buzzed and Kirk answered it.

"Scott here, Captain. The engines are cold, but Mr. Spock has inserted the formula for a cold start. Ready on your order."

The Enterprise jolted again. Kirk did not answer his Chief Engineer, but called Kyle.

"Hurry up!" he said brusquely. "Damage reports from all decks," he continued, turning to Uhura, who activated her console.

"All crew aboard," she reported a moment later.

"Very well," said Kirk. "Chekov, deflector shields up."

"Aye, sir. Shields up."

They were just in time to block phaser fire from the Maldhorians.

"Full impulse power, Scotty!" Kirk called over the intercom.

The Enterprise had to break the webbing which held her, and the dome where she had been trapped. It was difficult with a vessel of such size, as she was not easy to manoeuvre in a confined space. Kirk was asking his officers to do something which had never been attempted before.

"Sulu, course 411 mark 3," he ordered.

The helmsman swallowed and carried out the order, his hands sweating.

The ship moved slowly, breaking the webbing. A roar resounded round the dome - the Enterprise was rising. She trembled, fighting the gravity.

Kirk kept his eyes on the helm console, watching every one of Sulu's actions. He felt tired, and his wound was aching. He restrained a moan of pain and pressed a hand against his shoulder - he couldn't give up now.

"Accelerate, course 411 mark 7."

A roiling mass of dust and gases rose around the ship. Sulu's muscles cramped into knots, his nerves tensed.

"Phaser banks one and two, full power, fire!" Kirk called.

Chekov's hands flew over his console. "Aye, sir!" he replied, and fired.

Everything around the vessel exploded. Tongues of fire licked the outside hull. For a moment the main screen faded, then cleared again. The Enterprise broke through the sea of flames towards the vacuum of space.

"Temperature increasing!" Chekov shouted against the deafening noise.

"Ready to break into hyperspace!" Sulu informed him.

They were winning.

"Scotty, have we got warp speed?" Kirk asked.

"Aye, sir, all's ready," the Chief Engineer replied reassuringly.

"Go to warp one!" Kirk ordered, his hands clenching on the arm rest.

It was a matter of a moment for the Enterprise to lacerate the veil between normal and warp space. A whirl began to rotate, enveloping the vessel, stars became threads of light, then suddenly everything was quiet. Kirk and his crew had won free.

Suddenly a dazzling light invaded the bridge, making Kirk and his officers shield their eyes with their hands. The main screen framed the planet of Maldhor, which was exploding with terrible power, a frightful sight. It was as though a brilliant flower of fire blossomed in space.

The main screen flashed again, then the flower became smaller and smaller as the Enterprise retreated at warp speed. All sense of disturbance had gone. All the consoles were working normally. Then the screen darkened, and everything was silent.

Kirk turned to the science station. It was empty.

He pressed the intercom button, "Scotty, is Spock down there?" he asked, and his voice betrayed worry.

"No, sir. We thought he was on the bridge."

"Thank you," replied Kirk thoughtfully.

The intercom buzzed, and McCoy's voice said harshly, "Jim, you'd better come down here."

"What is it?" He stood up.

"Hurry!"

Kirk's face turned pale. He rushed to the turbolift, aware of a dreadful feeling of *deja-vu*, and a cold shiver ran down his spine. He pounded along the corridors to sickbay.

McCoy was waiting outside the intensive care section, his arms folded. Christine Chapel was coming out of the ward, and Kirk met her gaze; seeing tears in her eyes, his anxiety turned to fear.

McCoy moved into the room, and the Captain followed silently.

The First Officer was lying rigidly on a bed. The panel above him showed his life signs at a dangerously low level.

"What happened?"

McCoy gestured nervously. "There's something you should know about Spock."

Kirk frowned, staring at his Vulcan friend, who was paler than usual in the dimly lit room. "What's wrong with him?"

McCoy paced the room. "I've done everything possible for him..."

Kirk didn't understand, and followed the doctor to his office.

"What's wrong with Spock?" he insisted.

McCoy went to a cupboard and took out a bottle and two glasses; then he set them on his desk, avoiding Kirk's gaze.

"Jim, what happened to you down on the planet? I must know."

Kirk eyed him, his features clouded. "Bones, I've been though the same things we all have."

McCoy restrained a start. "What do you mean?" he insisted as he poured the brandy and handed a glass to Kirk.

"I've been shut in a cell, whipped by Thul's orders, and tortured to get our computer codes. Thul showed me false images of the deaths of my crew... Then I was made to dig with other slaves until I succeeded in escaping."

McCoy hesitated for a long moment, staring at the golden amber brandy in his glass. "Do you remember anything else? Are you sure, Jim?" he asked.

Kirk stood up and looked at him; the lines around his hazel eyes were deeper than they had been. "Yes, that's all. But... why?"

The doctor did not answer; he brought the glass to his lips and swallowed the contents at a gulp, then closed his eyes, feeling the brandy burning his dry throat.

"Hell!" he said, slamming his glass on the desk.

"Bones!"

"How can I say this straight?" McCoy asked miserably, rising to pace aimlessly. "Jim, Spock thinks... he killed you..."

Kirk shook his head, perplexed. "But I'm alive!" he objected firmly.

"Let me finish, Jim. Thul... Spock also thinks... he raped you, that Thul drugged him and forced him to... He can't bear it. He's willing himself to die."

Kirk's eyes widened, and he felt his heart in his mouth; he turned pale, and slumped in his chair. "Damned bastard!" he cursed in a whisper, and buried his face in his hands. "Oh god, it isn't true! It isn't true!"

McCoy refilled his glass and drank, staring at the liquid as though looking for an answer. Then he slammed his glass down on the table again.

"Jim, you're his last chance."

Kirk looked up at him, his handsome features haggard with distress. "What can I do?"

McCoy spread his hands. "I've done everything possible. A Vulcan mind is very powerful, and Spock has decided to commit suicide."

Kirk stood up and headed for the intensive care unit with

hesitant steps. What could he do for his friend? His friend, who was dying for a crime he had not committed.

He entered the room; it was quiet, and the lights were dimmed. He stopped for a moment in the doorway, his expression hardening. The Vulcan was lying on the bed, his breathing irregular, his face emaciated, his heartbeat almost non-existent. Kirk rubbed his eyes tiredly, choking back the imminent tears, then he slammed his hand on the table.

"Damned bastards!" he murmured. The pain helped him to recover his self control.

He took a chair and put it beside Spock's bed, then sat down with a sigh. He felt his heart throbbing in his chest as he stared at his dying friend, and rage set him trembling.

"Spock!" he said in a low voice. "Spock, I don't know if you can hear me... What you're thinking... it didn't happen. Thul made you believe it. Spock, you know I can't lie to you. I can't hide the truth. What I'm telling you now is the truth."

Kirk had a lump in his throat, and the words faded on his lips. He rested his elbow on his knee and rubbed his face with his hand.

"Spock, for god's sake, believe me! You're punishing yourself for something you haven't done."

The Captain sighed deeply as Spock remained motionless; the Vulcan's life signs remained low.

Kirk felt death hovering in the shadows of the dimly-lit room, and shuddered with fear. He was no telepath, but... many times in the past the two had linked minds. Perhaps... a tiny thread was left...

He took Spock's hand; it was cold - the coldness of death. Gently he positioned Spock's fingers on his face and desperately began to concentrate.

『You must feel my mind. I've told you the truth. What you believe never happened. Please, feel my thoughts...』

Kirk had his eyes closed, pressing Spock's hand to his face as he tried desperately to touch the Vulcan's mind.

"God, please let him sense my thoughts!" he prayed in a hopeful whisper.

『Spock... do you remember our first mission, and the Platonians? They tortured all of us. But at the end we won. Thul was a damned bastard... Spock! Oh god, let me touch his mind! Let him live!』

The friendship that tied him to Spock had to be strong enough to allow him to snatch his friend from death's grip. The Captain prayed with all the force of his soul, because he knew there was a god, a supreme intelligence, and that god had to save his friend.

Kirk remained silent for a long time, then he took Spock's hand from his face and laid it back on the bed. He looked up at the diagnostic panel, but the life signs were falling lower and lower.

He felt impotent and desperate. He couldn't cry - a Starship Captain wasn't allowed to cry, not even when his best friend was dying. He stood up sadly and turned away, seeing McCoy, who had been a silent witness to what had just happened.

"Jim, you've done everything you could. If Spock lives, he'll owe it to you," the doctor said in a broken voice.

Kirk looked at him, seeking a little comfort. McCoy looked down at the floor. The Chief Medical Officer was allowed to cry.

Spock was floating through a dark tunnel. Death was calling his name, and he felt drawn to her. He had no fear. Death was waiting for him. He felt light, very light. A sense of peace was filling his soul, and sorrow began to fade in the darkness of the Everlasting Night. Reality was not reality any more. A veil of soft silence enveloped his mind and gave him relief. A sweet call was leading him to the dimension where the Eternal Sleep reigned, to the Kingdom of the Shades. He felt himself go in that magic river to the Non-Existence....

Suddenly he felt a presence. A shining hand reached out to him and barred his way.

«NOOO! I must die!»

A feeble, far-away voice was praying for him. «Spock, come back! I've told you the truth. You're dying for something you didn't do...»

A powerful, luminous whirlwind snatched him up from the darkness and carried him up to the Light. He fought desperately until he gave up and an iridescent sun exploded into his mind. A thousand and a thousand shining tentacles seized him and pushed him out to the Dawn.

Now he was emerging from a grey fog. Someone was calling his name. That voice was irresistible... it was so familiar. That presence... Jim!

«Jim, I touch your mind... Jim, I know now...»

"JIM!"

Kirk jumped, and turned back.

McCoy widened his eyes, astonished.

"Jim?" Spock repeated in a whisper, and stretched out a hand to the Captain, who approached the bedside unbelievingly.

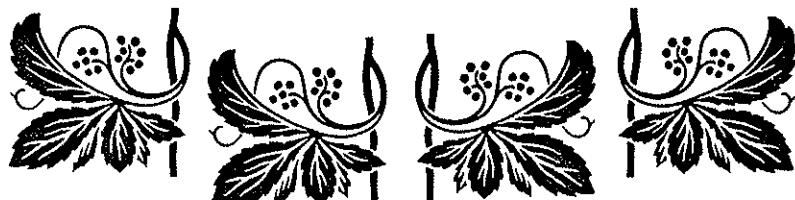
Kirk held Spock's hand in his own and squeezed it gently. God had listened to his prayers.

The doctor's face brightened with a sun-like smile. He read the diagnostic panel; Spock's life signs were rising slowly.

"Captain's Personal Log, stardate 8809.1.

"Thank god, Spock is recovering, and he'll soon be back on duty. The whole crew is very tired by the sad adventure on Maldhor. I'm sure that the memory of so much cruelty will remain in our minds. Our escape from the planet cost the lives of many innocent people, all the crewmembers of those Starships which disappeared under mysterious circumstances. I was compelled to choose between their lives and ours. But if I could have saved them, I would have saved only poor mindless beings.

"We have come back from Hell..."



VULCAN



Panic fear beats on that door in vain
No shock can start a tremor, no surmise
Wake sudden lightning in those watchful eyes
Unconscious of their glint of hidden pain

Nor friendship neither can admittance gain
That stronghold sore beset with Human spies
Will yield itself to none save in the guise
Of stony desert or volcanic plain

Its vision takes in planets, scans the stars
Monitors systems, comets, meteors,
Honours their being and computes their goal

But still one realm to darkness lies condemned
Denied alike to Human foe and friend
The close-sealed fortress of the Vulcan soul

Pac Deacon



THE ADVENTURE

by

Joyce Devlin

Well, here I go again, getting my atoms scattered and reassembled, I thought to myself as I stepped up onto the transporter platform with Jim - Captain Kirk, that is - Spock, our First Officer, and Lt. Anderson and Shadow of Security. The transformation of Jim's attitude towards the black German Shepherd had been a revelation in itself, for he now adored the dog, having come to the conclusion that not all dogs were dangerous. His uncle's dog had savagely attacked him, almost killing him, when he was a child; Shadow had saved his life from a man who had been trying to kill him in revenge for his brother. Jim had said that Shadow had risked his own life for his, and deserved that he should get over the childhood terror that breed held for him.

I in turn had counselled him that while it was all right getting over the fear, he should always be wary of any dog he didn't know, and not go rushing up to pat it. Jim had just laughed, telling me that my advice would have been all right had he been a child, but that his own common sense would hold him back from rushing up to just any dog; in fact it was most likely he would not meet any other dog than Shadow, who with his handler would be included in the Captain's landing party group. His reasoning was that the dog needed more exercise than he could get on the ship, and this way he could run free. That I agreed with. He also added that by taking Shadow along the dog could alert them to things the Human eye and ear could miss.

So here I was about to transport down to the planet's surface. I guess I'd let myself in for it as usual, because when Jim had said that he and Spock would be going down for a look before allowing his crew a few hours planet-side recreation, I had informed him pointedly that I would be going too. Jim had jokingly asked if I did not trust them; I had replied, "No," a pure flat "No," and as the turbolift door closed behind the three of us laughter erupted on the bridge.

It was a well known fact that nine times out of ten either Jim or Spock ended up in some kind of trouble that needed the medical training of yours truly. You'd think being CMO on the Enterprise they'd consider me and my feelings a little, but no, they always go galloping off into the unknown with me trailing along behind picking up the pieces or sticking bones back together.

Anyway, we beamed down to the planet, and boy, what a sight! We were in a beautiful valley; there was a lake in the centre, with a wooded area on the banks.

"It's lovely." Lt. Anderson spoke first after the initial surprise had worn off.

"Yes, Lieutenant, it is lovely. However, we have all experienced before how the beautiful can and sometimes does turn ugly," Jim responded.

"Yes, with you and Spock at the centre, usually," I chipped in.

"Bones." Jim shot me a dirty look. "Spock, what does the tricorder read?"

"Intelligent life form reading negative, animal readings in the immediate area."

"Anything harmful to us, Spock?"

"Nothing indicated," Spock replied as he pivoted around, aiming the tricorder and taking readings.

"Lieutenant, if you wish to let Shadow run free, then please do so," Jim said as I started taking water samples to analyse back aboard the ship.

"Shall we take a look around, Lieutenant? You and Shadow come with me. Spock, you and Bones take a look over that way, and we'll meet back here in, say, an hour. Check in every 15 minutes. All right, move it."

With Shadow running free ahead of them Jim and Anderson moved off towards the wooded area while Spock and I carried on further around the lake and onto a moor. It actually reminded me of the Scottish countryside with the rolling hills, and on the horizon the purple haze of a heather-like plant could be clearly seen.

"Scotty's going to love this, Spock," I stated as we came to a halt at the top of a hill we'd climbed. I looked back over the valley; there was no sign of civilisation anywhere.

"Yes, Doctor, I agree. The lie of the land and its geological composition resemble Scotland - so much so, one could almost believe one was there."

"Spock! What's that over there?" I asked, pointing to what looked like an artificial construction.

Spock followed my pointing finger. "Fascinating." He started to walk towards the artifact, with yours truly following like a collie dog.

When we reached it, the object proved to be an obelisk.

"Spock, be careful," I warned. "Remember what happened to Jim the last time we came across one of these."

"Yes, Doctor. Would you please contact the Captain."

I took out my communicator and flipped it open. "McCoy to Captain," I said, not wanting to hit the notes that had opened the obelisk the last time.

"Kirk. Yes, Bones?"

"Jim, we've come across an obelisk," I informed him.

"So have we. Spock, what do you make of it?"

"Captain, I believe this construction to have the same origin as the last one we discovered. Logically it would have the same or similar effects and purpose. I suggest that you be very careful."

"And don't open it accidentally," I added.

"Yes, Bones, I had come to that conclusion myself, and have not climbed up on it this time. Lt. Anderson has taken a recording of it for you, Spock, to compare. I'll meet you back at the beam-down point in half an hour. Kirk out."

Spock and I were waiting by the lake. My back was to the water as I watched the trees for any sign of Jim and Anderson. It was Shadow who broke from the trees first, at a gallop; as he got closer it was clear he was chasing a rabbit-like animal. As Jim and the lieutenant appeared Shadow and his quarry were zig-zagging across the open ground. I was so mesmerised by the tactics of the 'rabbit' that I failed to hear Spock's warning shout; Shadow hit me full in the legs and I went sprawling back right into the lake, along with Shadow and the rabbit, which swam away quite the thing.

I sat up blowing the water out of my mouth like a fountain, with a frog croaking on the top of my head.

"Oh my! Oh my!" Jim laughed.

"Shadow!" Lt. Anderson was trying not to giggle.

Spock simply stood, eyebrows raised to disappearing point.

"Don't stand there laughing - give me a hand out," I demanded.

"Who, me? Not on your life, Bones," Jim laughed.

As I stood up the frog jumped from my head back into the water. I was dripping frogs, tadpoles, you name it, and all Jim could do was laugh. I sat on the grass to pour water out of my boot.

"You all right, Doctor?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes!" I snorted, glad it was reasonably warm.

"I'm sorry, but you see, the rabbit ran between your legs, and Shadow, well, he couldn't stop, so he slithered into you, and both of you ended up in the lake."

"Shadow - is he all right?" I asked as I removed my other boot and emptied the water, tadpoles and all back into the lake.

"He's fine. A bit wet, but okay." She tried not to laugh as I fished a newt out of my trouser leg.

"Bones, I think we'd better beam back up to the ship and get you out of those wet clothes," Jim smiled. He managed to stop laughing long enough to call the ship.

So there I was in my stocking soles, wet boots slung over my shoulder, dripping wet all over the place as the transporter beam caught us. I had visions of my molecules being scattered all over the cosmos, and I can tell you I was glad to find myself in one piece and all assembled correctly.

"Dr. McCoy - what happened?" Kyle, the transporter chief, smiled as he saw me standing dripping all over the place along with Shadow.

"Don't ask!" I barked as I stalked off, leaving a trail of drops behind me.

After I had showered and changed I poured myself a good stiff drink, and had just sat down when my door buzzer went.

"Comet!" I shouted, and the door slid open to allow Jim to enter.

"Bones, are you all right?" he asked, looking guilty.

"I'm fine," I replied, adding, "You want a drink?"

"Yes, why not?" he replied. "Look, Bones, I came to apologise - I mean, for laughing. I'm sorry, but it was so funny."

"That may be so, but you could have helped me out," I snorted, handing him his drink.

"What? And land in the water alongside you? No way!"

So it was out. Jim thought I'd have hauled him in beside me.

"Who, me?" I asked innocently.

"Yes, you. And don't deny it. It's the sort of thing you would have done."

"Yes, well. I take it you've contacted Starfleet Command?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"We've to do a full survey of the planet. The Vulcan Science Academy are sending out a research team - and before you ask, Spock edited the recording and removed your ducking from it. He sent this along as he didn't think you'd want anyone else to see it." Jim handed over a small computer disc.

"I'll view it later," I said as I took it from him and placed it in my desk drawer for safe keeping.

"Bones, are you all right?" Jim asked as I felt myself swaying; had it not been for the desk I'd have passed out on the floor. Jim steadied me and sat me down before calling sickbay.

"Dr. M'Benga to Dr. McCoy's quarters." He put the call ship-wide as there was no guarantee M'Benga would be in sickbay. "Bones, you're burning up."

"Jim, I feel horrible," I managed to say before passing out.

I came to in sickbay, and was promptly violently sick. God, I felt terrible! Jim stood watching me; he too looked white.

"Dr. M'Benga, what's wrong with Bones?" I heard him ask through the isolation field that had been set up around my bed. I knew it had to be something contagious.

"Not a lot." M'Benga was smiling.

"What do you mean, Doctor?" Jim was annoyed.

"I have analysed the water samples Dr. McCoy brought back from the lake he fell into, and to be quite frank, Captain, he swallowed some of the water and has given himself a mild dose of dysentery. I've managed to get it under control with antibiotics. I think it may well be appropriate for all the landing party to undergo a course of injections - oh, and Shadow has been given a shot too."

"You mean the planet is contaminated, Doctor?" Jim asked.

I felt sick again. I had come to the conclusion of what was wrong with me myself, and I agreed with M'Benga's opinion.

"No, Captain, the planet is safe; only the water is contaminated. Water from a lake is usually boiled or purified before drinking, but what McCoy swallowed was totally unsafe for consumption. This is the result - fever, sickness and dysentery."

I was stuck in the isolation ward being barrier nursed by Chris Chapel for three days while the antibiotics worked. I'd had a mild case of diarrhoea and several days of being sick, but all had subsided on the fourth day, and on the fifth I was allowed up and discharged from sickbay.

By this time the Vulcan long range shuttle had arrived aboard the Enterprise, and the scientists had set up an excavation site on the planet's surface. Jim told me this as I stood on the bridge beside his command chair.

"And I've let Spock accompany them," he added.

"Oh. As long as he stays out of trouble. Jim, he's on his own down there."

"No he's not. There are twelve Vulcans with him, Bones." Jim smiled at me; he knew damn well what I meant.

"What I mean is, I'm not there to piece him back together again should anything happen."

"I know what you mean, Bones. However, we are instructed to stay in orbit and assist the Vulcans in any way possible," Jim said.

"I may just beam down to the planet and do a few tests myself. I saw some plants that might be useful, if they are the same as plants on Earth," I told him.

"If you do, Bones, I'm coming with you, and you can take a research team down as well," Jim smiled, adding, "to do the donkey work."

"Fine by me."

"Has M'Benga passed you fit?" Jim asked suddenly.

"Yes, he's discharged me," I said, adding, "Anyway, who's the Chief Medical Officer around here?"

"All right, Bones, I only asked."

Jim looked round the bridge; there was no-one paying any attention to the centre seat, as it was all the first team on watch - Uhura, Sulu, Chekov, all except Spock, who was planet-side - and they were all used to Jim and me having a discussion, battle of wills, or whatever, although usually it was Spock and me going hammer and tongs at each other verbally.

"Well, are you coming or staying, Bones?" Jim asked as he stood up and headed for the turbolift. "Mr. Sulu, you have the con."

"Aye aye, sir."

"Bones, are you coming?" Jim asked again.

"Yes," I returned and followed him, realising that he was as keen as I to check up on Spock.

"Then come on."

The turbolift took us to Deck 5, where the labs and sickbay are situated. I gathered two technicians and was ready in five minutes flat. Ten minutes after leaving the bridge we were down in the clearing by the lake again.

"This time, Bones, don't fall in the water, please," Jim pleaded. "All right, you two, the doctor has told you what to do, so off you go."

The technicians headed off in the direction I had first taken, sample jars and all.

"You all right, Bones? BONES!"

"What?" I said, jumping back to the present.

"You okay? You look very far away."

"No, I'm fine. Let's go and find Spock."

We found the Vulcan camp empty; the excavation site was also deserted. Jim looked at me, and I looked at him.

"Let's try over there." I pointed to a circle of trees about 1,000 metres away.

"Bones, they should be here."

"Yes, I know. However, I thought I saw something move." I was sure I had.

Jim took out his communicator and hailed Spock; as he did so the obelisk opened.

"Jim, look!" I shouted as the door slid open. "You've done it again."

"Spock here, Captain."

"Spock, where are you?"

"At the stone circle with the rest of the group, of course."

"I think you'd better get back to camp, Spock," I said over Jim's communicator. "Jim's done it again; the obelisk opened at the sound of his voice." I could imagine the look on Spock's face.

"I am on my way back. Please, Captain, Doctor, do not enter the obelisk, or go too close to it."

"After the last time, Spock, wild horses wouldn't drag me near it, and Jim won't be going inside, I'll make sure of that."

"And who will keep you from falling into it, Doctor? Spock out." He shut down the comlink before I could think of a suitable reply.

Spock arrived quickly, along with the twelve other Vulcans, and came to where Jim and I had made ourselves comfortable on a large flat stone while we waited for him.

"Captain, what exactly had you said just before the obelisk opened?" he asked.

"Kirk to Spock. Spock, come in," Jim repeated.

"Yes, similar but different tones," Spock observed. "Captain, this could be the key we were searching for," he added, adjusting the sound analyser unit until he reproduced musically the exact tones Jim had used.

"Spock." The Vulcan in charge spoke to him in their own language.

Spock crossed to the obelisk and entered, followed by some of the scientists, leaving Jim and me standing staring.

"Bones, why couldn't Spock open the obelisk, yet my voice seems to be the key?"

"I don't know, Jim. There must be answer somewhere," I replied, watching the entrance for any sign of Spock.

"There had better be," Jim replied.

Not all the Vulcans had gone inside; I noticed they were poking about the outside, making notes and recording the carvings on the structure.

When Spock reappeared he crossed to where Jim and I were sitting basking in the warm sun; there had been no point in doing anything else - we'd only have got in the way of the Vulcans.

"Well, Spock, did you find anything interesting?" I asked as he stopped in front of us.

"Captain, Doctor, there is a vast amount of information stored on stone tablets in there. It should prove very interesting."

"You mean a library?" I asked.

"I believe I just said that, Doctor."

"What do you propose to do, Spock?" Jim asked.

"Sar is considering transporting the tablets back to the

Enterprise; however, they are composed of a stone that will deteriorate once exposed to the ship's artificial gravity. To remove them would result in their being destroyed."

"So you're going to have to record the details and study the recording later, right?" I asked.

"A logical conclusion, Doctor. However, Sar believes there is a way to transport them back to Vulcan without destroying them."

"What do you think, Spock?" Jim asked.

"Captain, I have analysed the suggestion, and I consider the risk too high."

"Right, let's have a word with Sar." Jim strode off towards the obelisk.

"Jim, I'd suggest that you don't go in," I said.

"Bones, I have no intention of entering the damn thing," Jim shot back as we climbed up the steps at its side.

Spock descended the interior steps, and as my nose was bothering me I followed him, leaving Jim standing on the outside of the structure muttering to himself about old mother hens. I turned to hear what he was saying, lost my footing, and tumbled down the last three steps. No sooner had I landed in a heap at Spock's feet than Jim appeared at my side.

"Bones, are you all right?" he asked, trying not to burst out laughing in front of the Vulcans. As he spoke a three-dimensional image appeared.

Jim stood mesmerised as it began to speak; Spock, tricorder in hand, began to record the image; I sat where I'd landed on my backside, transfixed.

There in front of me was the most beautiful, blue-eyed blonde one could imagine. The language she spoke was familiar, but unplaceable. Her hair was long and silky, caught up at the side of her head to reveal pointed ears. My mouth dropped open in disbelief. Was this the proof that the Vulcans had been searching for all these years, proof that they were in fact the true descendants of the Preservers?

Once the image had faded I stood up. "Sorry," I stammered.

"Captain, are you all right?" Spock asked as he noticed Jim frozen to the spot.

"Did I set that off?" he finally asked.

"I believe so, Captain." Sar spoke in Standard for the first time.

"How? Why?"

"It would seem that the tones of your voice hit the same levels that are needed to operate the obelisk," Sar explained.

"I don't see how that's possible," I said

"Doctor, has it occurred to you that the Captain may well sound like the original programmer?" Spock asked.

"Look, gentlemen, this is not the place for a discussion. I suggest we return to the Enterprise."

As Jim spoke a panel in the wall opened, to reveal an inner chamber full of unfamiliar equipment.

"Spock?" Jim didn't sound too pleased.

"Captain, please stay still. Everyone, stay still," Spock commanded as what looked like a probe came out of the open doorway and halted in front of Jim.

"Keep still, Captain," Spock said again as a purple light shot out from the probe and centred between Jim's eyes; after a moment the beam shut down, and Jim swayed.

"You are not one of the Creators." The probe spoke in Standard. "Who are you?"

"I am Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise," Jim answered.

"Yea, the Creators said such a man would come from the stars, who would be able to operate the mechanisms by his voice alone. Welcome, Kirok. I am your servant."

"Jim, be careful!" I spoke in a whisper as the probe re-entered the inner chamber.

"Captain, please follow," Sam said.

"No, Jim, I won't allow it," I said. "It called you Kirok."

"Bones, I'm as curious as the next man to get to the bottom of this." Jim followed the probe into the chamber, closely followed by Spock.

The probe turned and created the same three-dimensional image as before, only this time the female too spoke in Standard.

"Kirok, our king, the Creators said you would come, accompanied by one who looked like us, and one of your own race. The information in the tablets is for your benefit. I am T'Lana, the last of our people, guardian of the sacred relics of times long past. You are here, Kirok, so now I can pass on and leave these records in your care. All you require to know is written upon them. However, the tablets cannot be removed from these chambers or they will disintegrate. The knowledge they contain will be of immense use to those that can read them. You alone, Kirok, have that understanding and the power to reveal the chamber's hidden secrets. Search your subconscious and you will find the key that was planted there before. Use it wisely." With those words the lights of the probe went out and it fell to the floor.

"Jim, what does it mean?" I asked.

"Kirok," Jim repeated. "Spock, that was the name Miramanee thought I gave. What does it mean?"

"You are the key, Captain," Spock informed him.

"You mean that when the obelisk erased his memory the last time it planted some information that will help us solve this mystery, Spock?" I asked as it dawned on me that that was the only time anything could have happened.

"It would seem so, Doctor," Spock answered.

"I thought you said before that you had an excellent eye for musical notes," I said.

"You are correct, Doctor. However, these carvings are the same, but different."

"That's illogical, Spock," I retorted.

"That may be so. However, the letters are the same but the sequence is different."

"So in other words it's got you stumped, eh?" I questioned, trying to lure Spock into a verbal by-play. It wasn't working.

"Bones, give up," Jim ordered; by the tone of his voice I knew he meant now, and not later.

"Captain, I think it may be safer if you return to the ship," Sar suggested, and I wholeheartedly agreed - this place was beginning to give me the creeps. I was beginning to ask myself how many more hidden chambers did this place possess, and what other surprises did it hold.

"Jim." I touched his arm lightly.

"Captain, I do think it would be for the best," Spock agreed.

"Gentlemen, if I do in fact hold the key then why should you consider it safer for me to return to the Enterprise?" Jim asked.

The lights inside the obelisk came on suddenly, filling the chamber with brilliant light, revealing a bank of panels against the wall.

"You have come at last, Kirok, as our Creators said." The voice boomed out, apparently from nowhere. "You are the Chosen One. I am T'Lana. Your questions will be answered. Kirok, our legends say the one like us will know how to work the unit."

"T'Lana, why me? What is our purpose here?" Jim asked, puzzled. So was I.

"Why, to awaken the sleeping chamber of course, Kirok," the voice replied.

That left me even more puzzled.

"Spock?" Jim questioned.

The two Vulcans went to the panels and began to operate switches in sequence. When they had finished the wall behind the unit slid back to reveal row upon row of sleepers in suspended animation capsules.

"I don't believe this!" I stated as Spock, Sar, Jim and I went in for a closer look.

"Bones?" Jim looked expectantly at me.

I took my medical tricorder and switched it on to take readings of the sleepers. "I don't know - I've never seen anything like this before," I informed him as I came to a stop beside one of the caskets.

"Look - isn't this T'Lana?" I asked, just as the eyes of the blonde beauty opened. The bed of orange mist she was lying in started to ebb away out of the bottom of the casket. As soon as it had completely gone the clear lid slid open, and the girl sat up. Jim helped her out.

"Kirok, you have come," she said, as she touched his face with her right hand.

Jim screamed in agony and fell to the floor in a heap.

"What the hell have you done to him?" I demanded as I knelt down beside him, taking readings.

"I reached out to touch his mind. I am the High Priestess T'Lana," she informed us.

I glanced up at Spock.

"Doctor?"

"I don't know what she's done, Spock, but Jim's in deep shock," I told him, pressing a hypo against Jim's arm.

"T'Lana, why did you not ask permission to enter the Captain's mind?" Spock challenged.

"As High Priestess I do not require permission."

"There's one difference, lady," I snapped. "Jim here is not telepathic."

"I do not understand. He is Kirok. He has been sent here to release us from our sleep."

"He is James T. Kirk," I stated firmly.

"He is Kirok! I sensed a strong telepathic mind when he helped me from my sleeper unit." She sounded confused.

"He is not telepathic, T'Lana." Spock stepped forward. "I am."

"As I am," Sar said.

"Then the bond I sensed that threw him away from me is with one of you?" she questioned.

I saw the look on Spock's face. "You tried to bond with him." It was not a question - it was a statement.

"It is my right as High Priestess to bond with Kirok," she informed us.

"Who the hell is this Kirok?" I demanded to know as Jim came to; the injection I had given him was having the desired effect.

"Jim, are you all right? How many fingers am I holding up?" I asked as I helped him back to his feet.

"Two," he replied.

"Fine."

"T'Lana, a question. Why?" Jim asked.

"It is my right to bond with Kirok."

"I am not Kirok."

"Yes, I can see that now. Kirok has the most powerful telepathic mind one can imagine. I feel that mind near me." She turned to Spock. "You are Kirok. It is your mind I am sensing."

"I am Spock, son of Sarek and Amanda," came Spock's reply.

"Do you have any visual means of identifying this Kirok?" I asked.

"Yea. Follow me." She led the way into another chamber and lifted out a stone tablet. "This is Kirok, the god our legend says will come and release us from our sleep."

There it was - a stone carving of Jim, Spock, and yours truly.

"There's no denying that, Jim," I piped up after the initial silence. "T'Lana, what else does your legend say?" Well, someone had to ask.

"It says that Kirok will come and help us rebuild our homes again once the seismic disturbances of the planet's surface have settled. It tells also that our race will become mighty again. Come - the units will have opened."

But instead of the lids having slid back as T'Lana's had, the rest of the units had burst open as glass does under pressure. The chambers were coffins. T'Lana was the only survivor.

"No! This is impossible! This cannot be! We were meant to start here afresh, a new civilisation." She turned to Jim, who stood at Spock's side.

"Bones?" he questioned.

I had already run my tricorder over some of the still forms. "They were dead before the units switched to the wakening process, hence the malfunction, Jim."

"That cannot be. I am still living - why did my unit not malfunction?" T'Lana demanded; then the reality of the situation hit her, and she collapsed into my arms.

"Jim, I think I'd better get her to sickbay, or we're going to end up losing her too."

Spock scooped her up into his arms with an easy grace; it was at times like this that I envied his ability to lift a dead weight.

"Captain, I suggest that you contact the ship from outside the obelisk," Spock said as we climbed the steps out of the structure.

Once everyone was standing on the grass Jim opened his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise," Uhura's voice came over.

"Four to beam up, Lieutenant, and have a medical unit standing by," Jim ordered, then he gave the command, "Energise."

The transporter beam materialised us aboard the Enterprise. Spock laid T'Lana down on the medical trolley that was waiting for us. I ran my scanner over her still form and studied the reading.

"Bones..." Jim swayed, clutching his head; he sank to his knees in agony. Spock swayed too, but managed to keep his feet. I set the hypo Chris handed me against Jim's arm, and he drifted into unconsciousness. Spock looked at me.

"I don't know what's wrong with him," I started to say.

"The bond has been ruptured," Spock informed me quietly.

"Bond? What do you...? Never mind. Later. For now, let's get them to sickbay."

Within minutes we were in sickbay. M'Benga took the Vulcanoid female to the isolation ward, while I ran a few tests on Jim, and found nothing. So I called Spock into the privacy of my office to ask a few personal questions.

"Spock, I need to know what you mean by the bond being ruptured," I said as Spock stood facing me, hands clasped behind his back.

"The bond itself exists; I will not discuss or explain it. But... The mind touch from T'Lana caused a small tear to appear in the fabric of the bond. I was unable to shield Jim from the influence of her mind while he was in direct contact with her."

"Can you help him by repairing the rupture?" I asked.

"No, I cannot..." Spock sank down into the chair in front of my desk.

"Spock, are you all right?" I asked, running my scanner over him; the pain reading was well above Human tolerance level.

"No, Doctor, I am not. I have a violent headache due to the damage to the bond," Spock explained.

"Look, I'm going to put you out for a few hours..."

"No. Call T'Pip to the ship. Only she can help Jim or me."

I did as Spock instructed and got Uhura to put me through to the Vulcan. As soon as I'd explained what had happened she agreed that Spock should be sedated, and that she would be up directly.

True to her word she appeared no more than five minutes after my call. I had obeyed her instructions and Jim and Spock were on beds side by side. Spock was conscious, but sedated to ease the pain to controllable levels.

.....

The Vulcan Healer stood silent, watching the two men who lay in a deep trance.

I had been waiting for almost an hour, watching her work, repairing and rebuilding the bond that held these two men firm and loyal to each other. She told me that the bond had formed spontaneously over a period of years; as Spock had once explained to me, there was a risk that melding several times with the same person could produce a bond, a linking of two minds, a constant awareness.

"Doctor, I have done all that I can do at this time," T'Pip finally said as she straightened up.

"Is there any permanent damage?" I asked.

"No. Spock will be coming out of the trance soon; your Captain will take an hour longer to recover. It is unusual to find this type of bond between two males..."

"What type of bond?" I asked as warning bells started to ring.

"Doctor, please remain calm. Your Captain is in no danger. The only side effect he will suffer is a slight headache. The bond is once again intact. And I was about to say, between two males who are not related. It is not a full mating bond, so you can stop thinking that," she replied, as if she had read my mind.

I squirmed under her gaze. "What are you trying to tell me?" I asked.

"Doctor, I am speaking to you as one Healer to another. These things you have to know. First, the bond is of the family type. Spock and your Captain will be aware if the other is in any danger or pain, alive or dead. The bond is in fact like that between identical twins. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. Next, Spock must not be allowed to touch the female again while the Captain is nearby. The contact she tried to form was the cause of the rupture in the first place, as the bond will reject any intrusion. I will try to establish a link with T'Lana to shield your Captain, as Spock will be unable to do so for the time being."

There was not a lot I could do to stop her, even had I wanted to, which I didn't, since Jim's and Spock's sanity depended on T'Pip creating a link that would shield them from T'Lana.

When I had checked on the pair of them - Jim and Spock, that is - I went to see T'Lana, who was sitting up in bed looking a whole lot better than the last time I had seen her.

"Doctor... Kirok - is he all right?" she asked.

"The Captain is going to be okay," I replied, as Spock appeared at my side.

"I told you to stay in bed!" I snapped.

"I am functional, and Jim is awake and getting up," I was informed, as Jim Kirk came into the isolation ward.

"Young lady, I think it's time you explained what's going on." He gripped the foot of the bed for support.

"Kirok... Kirk..."

"Jim will do fine."

"Jim, our Elders built the chambers in an effort to save our race. Our planet's surface was in turmoil, with tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes... In fact, it was only the Select who were placed in the sleeper units in suspended animation. I was the last, having so much to prepare being High Priestess. We were a great race once, and now I am the last living descendent of the Valun. I am sorry if I caused you any harm. I did not mean to. I was conditioned by the Elders to fulfil our legend, but T'Pip has removed that implanted compulsion, the need to bond with the great Kirok, who would come and awaken my people." She stopped speaking and lowered her eyes.

"Rest now, T'Lana," T'Pip instructed as she ushered us all out of the isolation ward and into my office.

"Captain, do you have any pain?" she asked as the door closed behind us.

"Yes, a helluva headache. Bones, can you do anything to ease it?" he asked me.

"T'Pip?" I looked to her for guidance.

"You may administer 5 mls of Dipitin, Doctor. That should settle the headache," she advised.

"Captain, I have taken a detailed reading on T'Lana," she continued. "She is Vulcanoid in every detail."

"Which presents us with a problem," Jim responded, looking from Spock to T'Pip. "That is, what should we do with her?"

"We can't just leave her on the planet," I piped up. "and the Prime Directive has been broken." Cheerful, wasn't I?

"That may be so, Doctor," Spock said, "but we did not break it. We were acting on orders from the Vulcan High Council, Starfleet Command, and the Federation."

"Maybe, but the problem still remains, what's to happen to T'Lana?" I asked.

"The logical solution would be to take her back to Vulcan." Jim came out with a typical Spockian reply.

"That would solve the problem, but will T'Lana agree?" I asked, putting a spanner in the works as usual.

"We'll just have to ask her, won't we?" Jim replied, marching out of the office.

The position was put to T'Lana, who looked from one to another of us before replying.

"Jim, the legend says Kirok knows what is best for his people. What is your will?" So she passed the ball right back into Jim's

court.

"Well, T'Lana, you couldn't survive on your own on the planet, and as you are the same genetic make-up as the Vulcans, it would be in your best interests to go to Vulcan."

"Where you could be of great value," Spock added, "by assisting in the translation of your records."

"Is this your bidding, Kirok - Jim?"

"Only you can decide your destiny, T'Lana," Jim responded. "Let me know what you decide, and we'll set the ball in motion."

"Ball, Captain? I was under the impression that a ball was for playing with," T'Lana responded quickly.

I had to smile. Jim was getting a taste of what Spock usually gave me in a verbal conflict.

"Just a figure of speech," he replied. "Bones, am I fit for duty?"

I ran the mediscanner over him and studied it for a few moments before I gave him my reply.

"Bones!" Jim was becoming impatient.

"Yes, but if the pain comes back you get down here sharpish, understand?"

"Yes, Bones."

With that Jim left sickbay. I knew where I'd find him should I need to - on the bridge. Spock and T'Pip left also, deep in conversation.

It was a good few days later that T'Lana informed Jim that she had no wish to remain on the planet alone, and it was agreed that she would go back to Vulcan, where her knowledge could be of great use. I found out later that Spock had contacted his father Sarek about her, and it had been decided by T'Pau, the matriarch, that T'Lana would be welcomed into the clan.

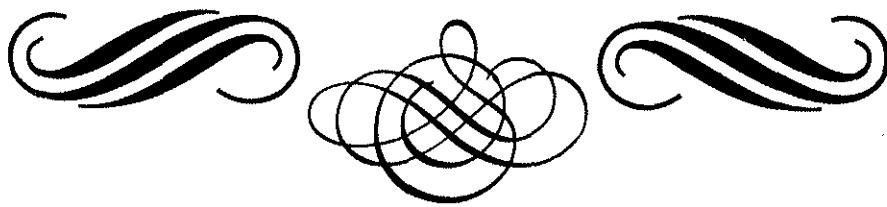
On questioning Jim about this decision I was informed that many generations back in Spock's family there had been a blond, blue-eyed Vulcan, and he understood that the family felt a kinship for T'Lana. So that was me told!

Looking back on these pages I realise that it's not only Jim and Spock who need looking after when they're planet-side, it's me as well. The three of us make a fine team, don't we? It shouldn't happen to a doctor, but to me it always does. Perhaps I should take a leaf out of M'Benga's book and just not beam down - I could hand the job over to him.

On the other hand Jim and Spock should delegate, and I'm going to suggest just that, as almost every time they beam down to a planet one or the other ends up in sickbay.

This time it was me first. That made a change. But as I said

before, it shouldn't happen to me.



RELATIONSHIP

When I lock
 Minds with Spock
 My knees knock
 Heart stands still
 He like rock
 Takes the shock
 Does not mock
 My lesser will

Tempest blows
 Danger grows
 Klingon foes
 Are ever near
 Friendship knows
 All that goes
 Awry in those
 Assaults of fear



Sheltering tree
 To which I flee
 Instinctively
 In adverse weather
 Hear my plea:
 'Come with me
 We will see
 This out together'



You and I
 United by
 Integrity
 Of One and Other
 Heart and eye
 You justify
 The galaxy
 My friend My brother



Pac Deacon



A FRIEND FROM THE PAST

by

Ann James

(With a little help from her Mum.)

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8704.3

"The Enterprise is in orbit around Capricus V; our mission is routine, but necessary. I have been ordered to investigate the Capricus Star System to find out if any of the six planets are capable of sustaining Human life.

"The second and fourth planets have both proved to be standard Class M. The first and third are totally unsuitable. Capricus I consist entirely of molten rock, and poisonous gases. Capricus III isn't much better; there is no evidence of any poisonous gas in the air, and the rocky areas are mostly solid, but the planet is totally devoid of life in any known form. Capricus V looks promising - so far. The preliminary investigations have been completed using the ship's sensors; our next task is to prepare a landing party to take readings and bring back samples of the soil, water and plant life. There is, as yet, no indication of any animal life.

"In two solar days I hope to have all the relevant information logged in the computer, as we are expected to collect a new crew member from the deep space passenger ship 'Traveller' before proceeding to investigate the sixth and final planet in the system."

Dr. Leonard McCoy was strolling leisurely along the corridor on his way to sickbay. He was feeling relaxed and refreshed after spending the last two hours in the sauna and swimming pool. His only problem was how he was going to cope with two Vulcan hybrids on board; what in heaven's name had he done to deserve this?

At least there was a chance that the lady would turn out to be a little more 'Human' than the ship's First Officer. He wondered if a Vulcan hybrid female having a Human mother and a Vulcan/Human father would be any different from a Vulcan hybrid male with a Human mother and a Vulcan father. Well, he wasn't going to think about it any more; he would simply keep his fingers crossed (and his toes) and hope for the best.

He heard someone speaking his name and looked up to see M'Benga striding towards him. They nodded and smiled at each other, McCoy wishing his colleague 'Good luck,' for M'Benga was joining the landing party which was about to beam down to the planet's surface.

There goes a man who understands Vulcans, thought McCoy. I never will. I don't think I'll even bother to try any more.

The sickbay doors opened as he approached, and he entered to

find Christine Chapel, his senior nurse, updating some medical records. He wondered how she would accept the new nurse. Picking up the tapes she had put to one side for his attention he nodded a greeting and disappeared into his office, chuckling to himself. It would be interesting to see if the new nurse put Chapel on her guard, knowing what he did about her feelings for the elusive Mr. Spock.

The landing party assembled in the transporter room, ready to beam down to the planet's surface: Mr. Spock; Dr. M'Benga; Mr. Johnson from Botany; Mr. Leslie from Security; and last - but not least - Captain Kirk.

They materialised in a small clearing alongside a large shimmering lake. Spock, M'Benga and Johnson began to record data and collect samples. Leslie circled around the immediate area, phaser in hand. The Captain moved around among his officers, asking a question here and there and generally getting in the way. He had only 'gone for the ride' - an expression Mr. Spock was still pondering over.

Gradually the men spread themselves out over quite a large area. Captain Kirk, however, remained close to the beamdown point. He lounged lazily against an old, gnarled tree trunk and gazed pensively into the distance. The lake, the mountain and the trees - they made a beautiful picture, and he wished he could paint; imagining the scene before him transferred to an old-style canvas made him sigh wistfully.

His pleasant thoughts were suddenly shattered by a low rumbling noise, and the ground trembled beneath his feet. He heard a shout for help, followed by the beep of his communicator. He was ready and poised for action as he snapped the instrument open. It was M'Benga.

"Captain Kirk, come quickly!" shouted the doctor. "Mr. Spock has had an accident."

Kirk ran through the trees, using the doctor's open channel as a homing device. It seemed as though he would never find them. The tangle of trees ended suddenly, and he found himself almost at the foot of a crumbling cliff face.

"M'Benga!" he called urgently.

Johnson appeared from behind a large rock; he was filthy, and his face was scratched and bleeding.

"Here we are, sir, just round this corner. Mind your head, Captain, there are still some loose rocks falling from the cliff face."

Kirk picked his way carefully over the rough ground. He found M'Benga crouching over the inert form of his First Officer, who was lying awkwardly on the ground. The Captain was at his friend's side immediately. Spock was unconscious; there was blood trickling from a cut on his cheek, and his left arm was wedged under a jagged, heavy-looking rock.

"Mr. Leslie!" called Kirk. "Help me with this. Gently, now."

Between them the two men managed to lift the rock from Spock's arm. M'Benga was waiting to examine the damage with his medical scanner.

"It's broken, sir. In two places," he said.

"What happened?" asked Kirk.

It was Johnson who answered. "We were walking along that rough path," he said, pointing to the base of the cliff - the path was no longer visible. "I heard a rumbling noise, and when I looked up I saw small stones starting to roll down the cliff face. Mr. Spock was just behind me. He must have heard the noise before I did, because as I looked up I felt his hands on my back as he tried to push me out of the way of the falling rocks. I fell face down and shielded myself as best I could. When the rockfall subsided I looked back to see if Mr. Spock had managed to get out of the way. He was half covered with rubble, sir. That's when I called for help."

Kirk turned back to M'Benga, who was still examining the Vulcan. "How is he?"

M'Benga shook his head worriedly. "We'll have to get him back to the ship straight away, sir. As well as breaking his arm he has a badly fractured right leg, some cracked ribs which are causing internal bleeding, and he's also quite severely concussed."

The Captain flipped open his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Scott here, Captain."

"Beam us up on the double, Scotty. Have a medical team standing by in the transporter room, and instruct Dr. McCoy to prepare for surgery. Mr. Spock has had an accident, and requires his urgent attention."

"Aye, sir."

No sooner had Kirk closed him communicator than he heard the familiar hum of the transporter beam. McCoy and his team were waiting when they arrived on board, and Spock was whisked away. Kirk turned to the botanist.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Johnson?"

"I'm fine, sir. Just a bit shaken up."

"Hmm. You'd better go to sickbay as well. Once they've checked you over get yourself cleaned up, file your report, then have a few hours rest."

"Yes, sir," replied the young man as he left the room.

Kirk moved over to the control panel and flicked a switch. "Kirk to bridge."

"Bridge. Scott here, Captain."

"Scotty, take charge of another landing party to complete the planet survey. And Scotty..."

"Aye, sir?"

"Please be careful."

"Dinna fash yersel', Captain. We'll be all right."

"Instruct Mr. Sulu to take the con. I'll be in sickbay. Kirk out."

Kirk left the transporter room and practically ran along the corridor to the turbolift which would take him to sickbay. He prayed silently that Spock would be all right.

McCoy and M'Benga were still operating when he arrived, so he went into McCoy's office, helped himself to a large measure of the doctor's Saurian brandy, and sat down. He downed the amber liquid in one mouthful and sat hunched over the desk staring into the empty glass.

Half an hour later McCoy found his Captain in the same position. Kirk whirled round in the chair, hardly daring to breathe.

"How is he?" he said, his voice scarcely more than a whisper.

"I think he'll be okay, Jim," said McCoy tiredly. Sitting down on the edge of the desk and rubbing his eyes he sighed deeply and continued, "We've mended his broken bones and repaired a tear in his right lung. The rest is up to him and his Vulcan self-healing."

Kirk relaxed a little, glad that his friend was at least out of danger.

The intercom bleeped. "Transporter room to Captain Kirk."

Taking a deep breath before pressing the button on McCoy's desk, the Captain turned towards the viewer. The ship's Transporter Chief appeared on the screen.

"Kyle here, sir. New crew member Nurse Tirak has just beamed aboard. 'Traveller' was ahead of schedule and brought her to us. Where shall I send her, sir?"

Kirk closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead wearily. Damn! He'd forgotten all about the new nurse. Ah well, 'Traveller' had saved him a trip anyway.

"Hmm. Have Security take her to her quarters, then I'll see her in Briefing Room 4 in fifteen minutes."

"Aye, sir."

Kirk looked at McCoy. "After I've briefed the lady I'll bring her here, and she'll be all yours, Bones."

"That's fine, Jim. She can go to work straight away. I presume she knows about the Vulcan self-induced hypnosis, and what to do when Spock starts to come round."

"I'm sure she does, Bones. After all, she is part Vulcan."

"Hmm. I hope she gets on okay with Chapel," said the doctor, half to himself.

"Why shouldn't they get on?" asked the captain.

"Well, you know how touchy Chapel is where Spock is concerned. She may think Tirak is some sort of threat."

Kirk sighed. "Well, keep an eye on her, Doctor. I'm sure Tirak wasn't posted to the Enterprise simply to put Chapel's nose out of joint regarding my First Officer." He smiled weakly at his poor attempt at joviality.

"I've already had a chat with Christine. I'm sure she'll be okay," said McCoy.

Kirk stood up and stretched his arms above his head. "Ohhh!" he groaned. "I'm as stiff as a poker. I think I'll go for a workout in the gym later."

McCoy removed his overall and went to his wardrobe for a fresh uniform. "I hope Nurse Tirak will be easier to get on with than Spock was when I first met him. The ratio of Human and Vulcan in her is quite different to that in our Science Officer. Her father is a Vulcan/Human hybrid, and her mother is a Human. I wonder if she'll be a Vulcan with Human characteristics, or a Human with Vulcan characteristics?"

"We'll soon see," said Kirk as he headed for the door. "I'm off to brief her now."

Kirk looked in on Spock as he left sickbay. The Vulcan looked as if he was sleeping peacefully; only a few people would know that even though he was deeply hypnotised he was still aware of what was going on around him. Kirk smiled to himself as he remembered another time when Spock had healed himself this way; Christine Chapel had thought he was completely unconscious, and that it was quite safe to hold his hand while she watched over him - and he also remembered her embarrassment when she found out otherwise.

Nurse Rhian Tirak had just enough time to freshen up and stow away her few personal possessions in her cabin when her guide returned to escort her to the briefing room.

As she stepped over the threshold she saw a handsome man wearing a regulation tunic in yellow adorned with Captain's braid.

"Captain James T. Kirk," he said, smiling as he spoke.

"Nurse Rhian Tirak," she replied, standing stiffly at attention.

"Relax, Nurse," Kirk continued. "Are you ready for briefing?"

"Yes, sir."

Nurse Tirak waited patiently while Kirk read quickly through her file. When he had finished he gave her a rough idea about life on the Enterprise, and then watched her closely as she gave a brief account of herself and the training she had received before joining the ship.

She seemed to be a pleasant, sensible girl, not more than twenty years old. In actual fact, much to his surprise she was just

turned thirty; her youthful looks were due to her Vulcan blood. Everyone knew that the life span of a Vulcan was greater than that of a Human. She had inherited the usual Vulcan features from her father, straight jet black hair, delicately pointed ears and upswept eyebrows. The only visible feature inherited from her mother were her eyes. They were silver-grey. Kirk also noticed a strange lilt to her voice, and stranger still, occasionally the corners of her mouth twitched into a smile which stayed there for a moment.

He asked her about the accent. She explained that her mother's family originated from a tiny country on Earth called Wales; she had spent a lot of time there as a child, and had done a lot of her training there. Apparently all the people in this tiny country spoke in the same sing-song way. Kirk decided that he liked the accent, and he was sure that McCoy would have something to say about the smile.

The briefing completed, Kirk escorted her to sickbay since he was returning there himself. On the way there he explained about Spock's accident, and discovered that she already knew the First Officer. Her father had worked in Sarek's office; she and Spock had known each other as children, and then met again when Spock was at the Academy.

The sickbay doors opened and they went in.

"Here we are," Kirk said brightly.

The room was empty.

"Bones!" he called. "Where are you?"

"In here, Jim."

They went into the next room. McCoy was checking the body function panels over Spock's bed, and turned as they entered.

"Ah, there you are," he said. "Is this my new nurse?"

Kirk nodded. "It is. Doctor, this is Nurse Tirak. Nurse Rhian Tirak."

McCoy's eyebrow lifted in a silent question. *A strange name for a Vulcan.*

Kirk continued, "Nurse Tirak, this is Dr. Leonard McCoy, my Chief Medical Officer."

Without thinking, McCoy held out his hand in greeting. She took it. That was his first surprise, and he glanced at Kirk questioningly.

"Welcome to the Enterprise," he said. "I hope you will be happy here." He didn't expect a reply.

"Thank you, Doctor. I am pleased to be here."

McCoy noticed the slight smile on her lips, and his face broke into a wide grin. "Well, well..."

"I'll be off, then," interrupted Kirk. "Bones, a word before I go."

They went into the next room.

"Go easy on her, Bones," whispered Kirk. "Give the girl a chance to settle down."

"Whatever do you mean, Captain?" McCoy asked with mock innocence.

"You know exactly what I mean, Doctor. Get to know her first - you may be pleasantly surprised."

McCoy held up his hands in submission. "Okay, okay, whatever you say, Jim," he smiled.

Kirk turned to go. "Let me know if there is any change in Spock's condition. I'll be in the gym if anyone wants me."

"Will do, Jim."

McCoy returned to the inner room where he found Nurse Tirak studying the diagnostic panel with great interest.

"Have you seen one of these before, Nurse?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, but it wasn't quite as sophisticated as this one," she answered in her light singing voice.

McCoy smiled at her; he couldn't wait until Spock was better - what fun he was going to have. They chatted for a while, and McCoy was pleased to find out that she had received extensive training in one of the best hospitals on Vulcan. She knew exactly what would have to be done when Spock regained consciousness. He left the First Officer in his new nurse's capable hands.

"I'll be in the lab next door if you need me," he said.

"Very well, sir," she replied.

Rhian pulled up a chair and made herself comfortable. She calculated that it would be at least two more hours before Spock would need her help. She settled down to wait, watching the sleeping face of her old friend. He was still as handsome as ever, and looked very much like the boy she had once known. She wondered if he had changed, whether living and working among Humans all these years had softened him at all.

"Spock," she sighed, "it is good to see you again."

Then she smiled to herself, wondering what he would say when he realised who it was bringing him back to consciousness. She hoped they would be able to renew their friendship. Now that T'Pring was no longer a threat, perhaps they would become more than just friends. Again she sighed, contented, hardly able to believe her luck at gaining a post on the Enterprise.

Spock opened his eyes with some difficulty and looked around the room. He was in his own bed in his own quarters. He stretched his stiff muscles, and had the strangest feeling that he should be somewhere else. Frowning, he tried to remember, then his face cleared - no matter. Throwing back the bedcover he sat up, swinging his long legs over the edge of the bed as he did so. He felt the

warmth of the floor against the soles of his feet and uncharacteristically wriggled his toes. His thoughts returned to the sensations the rest of his body was experiencing - it was as if he had just woken suddenly from a very deep sleep. He rubbed his hands over his face and decided that a shower would do him good.

Fifteen minutes later he was striding along the corridor towards the main recreation room. He still felt slightly disorientated, and as he turned to enter the room he collided with someone entering from the opposite direction. He shook his head in disbelief at his actions.

"Mr. Spock, are you all right?" enquired a female voice. "I'm so sorry," it continued. "I was miles away."

The voice sounded familiar to Spock. Shaking his head, he blinked as he realised it was Rhian Tirak. She had boarded the Enterprise the previous day to take charge of the mass inoculation programme on Arian II. She was a doctor now - he remembered her saying once that it was all she ever wanted to do. First she would qualify as a nurse, then she would continue her studies and become a doctor. He felt the light touch of her hand on his arm, and allowed himself to be guided into the room.

"Come and sit down," she said, pushing him gently into the nearest chair.

Fortunately, the room was empty. She went to the food synthesiser and returned with a glass of orange/green liquid.

"Here, drink this," she said, offering him the glass. "Your mother told me about it; apart from its strengthening properties she said that you were rather partial to it."

He drained the glass. "Thank you, Doctor," he said, wondering why she and his mother would have reason to discuss his drinking habits.

"Are you feeling better now?" she asked, looking down at him anxiously.

"Yes, thank you," he replied. "Please forgive my clumsiness. I am not quite myself this morning. I seem to have slept very heavily, and woken too quickly."

Before Spock could wonder at himself for offering this explanation for his clumsiness she asked him if he had had breakfast. He admitted that he hadn't.

"Neither have I," she continued. "Let's get something to eat. Do you mind if I join you?"

He felt sure that she had every intention of joining him whatever his reply, so he nodded his assent and followed her to the food processor. They selected their meals, took their trays to a corner table, and sat down.

They ate their meal in silence. It was ten years since they had seen each other. Spock looked at his companion, to find that she was studying him intently. Her eyes clung to him.

"I have missed you, Spock," she murmured.

Spock gazed at her without answering. She sighed deeply, collected the dishes together, and returned them to the disposal bins. He got to his feet as she returned to the table; she looked at him intently, and he wondered what she was thinking behind those silver eyes.

"I am due to report for duty in thirty minutes," he said. "Please excuse me - I must return to my quarters."

Rhian nodded silently and he turned to leave the room.

"Spock!" she called after him.

He half turned in the doorway and looked back.

"May I speak with you later? I... I have messages from your mother."

He nodded.

"Perhaps," she continued, "we could meet for supper... and I am told that the Observation Deck is most interesting..."

Spock hesitated for a moment, then nodded again. "Very well."

"Thank you." She smiled slightly, and turned to speak to one of her colleagues who had just entered the room.

As he walked along the corridor Spock realised that the strange feelings he had experienced when he got up had now been replaced by thoughts of the woman he had just left. These new feelings were even stranger than the previous ones.

He cast his mind back ten years, and pictured her as she had looked that last day, even remembering what she had been wearing, a simple travelling outfit of green and silver, which matched the silver in her eyes.

She was even more beautiful now...

He pulled himself together abruptly; what was wrong with him today? Entering his cabin, he immediately began to prepare himself for twenty minutes of meditation.

Half an hour later Spock was on the bridge, with all thoughts of Rhian Tirak pushed firmly to the back of his mind.

But for how long?

The Enterprise was en route to Starbase 5, where they were scheduled to collect a consignment of vaccine for delivery to Arian II. The journey would take approximately five days, well within the deadline of seven days which they had been given by the Arian government. The virus which was threatening the population of that planet was not yet at a critical level, but the quicker they got there the less discomfort the people would have to suffer. Dr. Tirak was there to supervise the transportation of the vaccine and help Dr. McCoy administer it to the planet's medical team. She would then advise them on how to help the people who were already affected.

Spock knew there was little for her to do until the Enterprise reached the Starbase, and after advising her about the ship's excellent recreation facilities he tried his best to keep well out of her way.

After a particularly tedious duty period Spock decided to spend some time in the swimming pool before his meeting with Rhian. He changed into a pair of green swimming trunks, and as he walked along the side of the pool towards the diving board he saw Rhian lying on one of the loungers. Her eyes were closed.

He dived into the pool and swam effortlessly for a good twenty minutes. As he was about to leave the pool he saw her get up and walk elegantly to the lowest diving board. He stopped and watched her, thinking that she looked a bit nervous as she stood with her toes on the very edge of the board. However she jumped, bounced once, and arching her back as she rose into the air, performed a perfect somersault and sliced gracefully into the water. Soon she was standing next to him.

He raised an eyebrow. "Your diving has improved greatly," he said with approval.

"Why, thank you, kind sir," she said, smiling shyly and bobbing daintily in the water.

He inclined his head, and suddenly felt awkward standing there. "Dr. Tirak," he said, "if you do not shower and change immediately you will be late for our appointment."

"You are quite correct, Mr. Spock," she agreed, scrambling hastily out of the water. "I'll see you in thirty minutes," she called over her shoulder.

Spock floated lazily on his back and watched her as she walked towards the changing room. *Why, he wondered, do I find pleasure in watching her?*

He could not think of a reason; he only knew that it gave him a certain amount of pleasure that he should not be feeling. After swimming two more lengths of the pool he climbed out and made his way to the men's changing room.

Spock and Rhian met in the recreation room as arranged, to the astonishment of the officers who were relaxing there. Rhian gave him the message tapes from his mother, and they spent an hour in the observation area chatting over old times and gazing at the stars. Spock was amazed at himself. He had never before 'chatted over old times' with anyone, and was both surprised and somewhat disappointed to find that the time had passed so quickly that the evening seemed to be over in no time at all.

Rhian stifled a yawn, and blushed with embarrassment. "Oh! Please forgive me, Mr. Spock. I think it's time I turned in. All that swimming on top of the travelling I've done these last few weeks seems to have caught up with me all of a sudden. I feel as if I could sleep on my nose."

"Sleep on your nose?" Spock raised an eyebrow to its limit; would he ever get used to these peculiar Terran modes of expression?

She laughed. "Just a silly Earth expression," she said. Her Vulcan features made him forget sometimes that she had inherited a lot of her mother's characteristics.

Spock rose from his seat and escorted her out of the room and to her quarters. Everywhere the corridors were dim and quiet.

"Dr. Tirak..." Spock hesitated, carefully arranging his thoughts into words not normally used by a Vulcan.

She looked up at the First Officer, her head on one side questioningly.

"I... enjoyed our evening together. The time passed most pleasantly."

"I too enjoyed our evening. Perhaps..."

He wondered why she had tailed off her sentence, as if she had forgotten what she was going to say. Unintentionally he fulfilled her silent wishes by finishing off the sentence just as she had hoped.

"Perhaps... we could spend another evening together?"

"I would like that," she replied, smiling up at him.

They had reached her cabin door. Spock was glad it was late; it suddenly dawned on him that he had no excuse for being in the vicinity of the female crew's quarters. No matter, he would think of something. Anyway, he was the First Officer, and a Vulcan - he did not need an excuse to be anywhere on the Enterprise.

Rhian turned towards him, laid her hand on his arm and looked up into his face. Her eyes shimmered like quicksilver.

All at once he realised that he did not want to leave her, to return to the seclusion of his own quarters. They stood motionless for a few seconds, then the moment was shattered when a security guard appeared round the corner. Rhian removed her hand from his arm and pressed the button to open the door of her cabin.

"Goodnight, Mr. Spock," she whispered softly.

"Goodnight, Dr. Tirak," he replied, and continued along the corridor to the turbolift.

The Enterprise arrived at Starbase 5 and assumed a standard orbit. All off-duty crew members were allowed one hour to beam down to the vast shopping complex which had been built especially to cater for the needs of space travellers.

Spock was just leaving the bridge when he heard Rhian report that the vaccine had been beamed aboard, checked, and safely stored. Stepping into the lift, he instructed it to take him to G Deck, where he was due to meet Mr. Scott in the auxiliary control room. He stepped out of the turbolift, and was walking along the corridor when he heard his name called. It was Rhian. He stopped and turned to face her.

"Spock, are you beaming down to the base?" she asked

expectantly.

"I see no reason to do so," he replied, perhaps a little too abruptly

"Oh!" she said, sounding a bit put out. "Then perhaps there is something I can get you while I'm there?"

"Thank you, no." He nodded and continued on his way.

Later, his business with Mr. Scott completed, he went to his quarters. He needed to meditate, to try and sort out his jumbled thoughts and the unexplained feelings which were beginning to irritate him slightly.

Thankfully he reached his quarters and went inside. It was like stepping from a spacecraft onto his home planet. The sleeping area was decorated in a typical Vulcan style, even the temperature was similar to that of his home; he could easily have been in his bedroom in his father's house. He showered and changed into a simple black robe, then kneeling in the Vulcan way he relaxed his body and prepared to meditate.

An hour later, the meditation not having helped much, he was walking along the corridor towards the turbolift which would take him down to T Deck and the botanical garden when he heard Vulcan music being played. He stopped and listened - it was coming from the gymnasium. Much against his better judgement, he went in. It was Rhian; somehow he had known it would be. She was dancing. He knew he should leave immediately, but his body refused to obey his commands. He stood quietly and watched her slender body sway and pirouette gracefully to the music.

The melody stopped abruptly and she sank into a dignified heap on the floor. Spock wondered if she was all right, but almost at once she rolled over onto her back, breathing heavily.

Spock relaxed against the wall. Unbelievably he wanted to go and sit on the floor beside her. Why, he wondered, did this woman cause such strange feelings inside him? He had felt oddly drawn to her these last few days. So many questions, but no answers - at least, none he was prepared to accept. He felt as if his Vulcan half and his Human half were fighting each other for control of his emotions. His Human half was saying, Go on - go over, sit on the floor if you want to. Talk to her, get to know her better; while his Vulcan half frowned disapprovingly. You are Vulcan, it said simply.

He took a deep breath and turned to leave. Rhian must have heard the sigh, because she immediately sat up.

"Spock!" she exclaimed. "How long have you been there?"

"Approximately 10.25 minutes," he replied, wishing he had left sooner.

"Hmm," she said, getting up from the floor and padding softly towards him.

He took another deep breath as she stopped in front of him and looked up into his face innocently.

"What did you think of my dancing?" she asked.

She was teasing him, and he knew it. He swallowed uncomfortably.

"It was most... professional, Doctor."

"Mr. Spock, why do you always call me Dr. Tirak," she asked.

"Because it is your name," he replied, frowning slightly. He did not understand why she should ask such an obvious question.

"My name is Rhian," she said quietly. "Couldn't you call me Rhian?"

"That is your personal name. It would not be correct for me to use that. You are entitled to expect others to use your family name and your title."

"You are not 'others', Spock. You used to call me Rhian," she said, pouting. "Once upon a time."

"That was when we were very young," said Spock. "Children are allowed to use each other's personal names." He cast his mind back briefly to his childhood days on Vulcan.

Rhian took a step closer to him and traced the outline of the science badge on his tunic with the tip of her finger. Ordinarily he would have moved away, preventing the contact, but strangely he did not mind; Rhian's touch was somehow calming.

"Please?" she cajoled. "Just when we are alone."

The expression on her face tore at his heart as he looked down at his childhood friend. She had changed from a pretty young girl into a beautiful woman. Why had he not contacted her? He had thought of her often enough.

Spock sighed. "Very well," he relented. "I will call you Rhian, but only when we are alone."

She nodded. "I'm going for a swim now," she said. "Would you like to join me?"

His Vulcan half said, *No!* but his voice said, "Yes, I believe I would."

They made their way to T Deck and went to their respective changing rooms.

In the pool Spock slowed his pace so Rhian could keep up with him. She made a valiant effort, but after four lengths she was forced to stop.

Spock stopped alongside her. "Are you all right?" he enquired.

"I'm fine," she panted. "Just out of condition."

"Perhaps we should stop now," said Spock. He launched himself effortlessly out of the water and onto the side of the pool. Grasping Rhian's hand he pulled her out easily to stand beside him. They stood quietly, facing each other. Spock touched Rhian's cheek gently with the tips of his fingers.

Such sensitive fingers...

Realising what he was doing, Spock breathed in sharply and abruptly pulled himself together. "I... er... forgive me. I..."

She put her fingers to his lips. "Shhh," she whispered, smiling up at him. "Let's go and change, and have some supper. I'm starving."

Spock nodded silently, appalled at his lack of control. They returned to the changing rooms without another word.

Standing in the shower, Spock let the water flow over his body. He closed his eyes and gave free rein to his jumbled thoughts. Whatever had possessed him to do such a thing? What if someone had entered the room? It didn't bear thinking about. He tried to push all thoughts of Rhian out of his mind, but they refused to be pushed. What was he going to do? Perhaps some more meditation? No, what was the point? He had already tried that without much success.

He sighed deeply and held his head back, letting the water spray onto his face. He squeezed his eyes closed as tightly as he could, but he was unable to prevent the tears escaping. They had been close friends as children, but they were adults now. How beautiful she was!

Spock remembered how she had always tried to help him when the other children had teased him so mercilessly. She had shown him her 'secret places', and told him he could go there any time he wanted to be on his own. He had spent a lot of his time there, trying to relax and forget that he was supposed to be learning to control his emotions, not let them spill out as Human children did.

She never laughed at him. She would simply sit with him until he regained control and was ready to face the world again. He half smiled to himself, remembering the time she had needed his comfort.

He had been on his way home from the library. Rhian was playing a game with some local Vulcan children. Suddenly, as he was walking past, he saw her trip and fall awkwardly. She got up quickly, but he could see that she had hurt herself because the tears started to flow silently down her cheeks. The Vulcan children stood silently and stared disapprovingly as she swept her hand angrily across her face. Then she turned and ran, flying past him through the front gate of his father's house, past his mother, who was tending her flowers, and disappeared into the back garden. Spock noticed that the Vulcan children continued their game as if nothing had happened.

He remembered scrambling through the hole in the hedge and finding Rhian, her face tear-stained, her leg bloodied. He also remembered taking her hand firmly in his. Later, he had sneaked into the house to find something to wipe her face and clean her leg so that she was reasonably clean and tidy when she went home.

From that day on they were firm friends. Then quite suddenly her father had been posted to Earth, and they had not met again until he was at the Academy. She was studying on one of Starfleet's medical courses. Their friendship had blossomed again, but this time it had been marred by the fact that Spock had been joined to T'Pring. At the end of Rhian's course they had parted again, realising that they could never be more than friends.

Now they had met again, and this time he was free. Was he going to let the opportunity pass again? Could he bear to let her go out of his life a third time?

"No!" he told his Vulcan half firmly. "I will not let this chance pass me by."

"Spock!" The voice seemed to come from far away. "Spock! Are you all right?"

Spock's eyes snapped open and he found himself looking straight into the worried face of his Captain.

"Captain! Forgive me... I was lost in thought."

"I could see that," said Kirk, frowning with concern. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"Quite sure, Captain," answered Spock in a steady tone.

"Good," Kirk grinned as he began to cover himself with soap suds which smelled of sandalwood. He rubbed his skin vigorously. "There's nothing like a good workout to make a man feel better."

"Indeed, Captain," replied Spock as he stepped out of the shower and into the drying area.

"Followed by a refreshing shower, some supper, and a game of chess. How about it, Spock?"

"Sir?"

"Chess, Spock. Would you like a game of chess?" Kirk was puzzled; it was unlike Spock to be so inattentive.

The Vulcan's heart sank. He could not refuse his Captain a game of chess - what reason could he give? The fact that he wanted to spend the evening in the company of a woman? He felt sure that Kirk would think he was ill. His mind raced, trying to think of a suitable excuse. He had no excuse.

"That would be most welcome, Jim. I will see you in the recreation room in approximately thirty minutes, if that meets with your approval?"

"It certainly does, Spock. I'll see you later."

Spock dressed quickly and hurried to the recreation area. There was no sign of Rhian. He sat down; impatience was a curious feeling. Five minutes later Rhian glided into the room. She was wearing a beautiful kaftan embroidered with vividly covered threads. Her hair was hanging loose, rippling down her back like blue-black waves. They collected their meals from the food processor unit and sat down at their usual table.

Spock was uncertain how to tell her about the chess game. "I have just seen Captain Kirk. He was in the shower..."

His hesitation made her look up. "And?"

"He suggested that he and I play a game of chess this evening."

"Oh!" she said, bending her head as if she was suddenly very

interested in what was on her plate.

Spock realised she was disappointed as she toyed with her remaining food. "Rhian," he whispered gently.

The use of her personal name in company made her look up again. "It's all right - I understand." She stood up and began to collect the dishes together.

"Please stay!" Spock said raggedly. He was surprised to hear himself say such a thing so desperately.

At that moment Captain Kirk came into the room and joined them. He nodded to Rhian, and turned to speak to Spock. "Are you ready for the game?" he asked.

"Yes, Captain," said Spock as he opened the box of chess pieces that Kirk had brought with him.

Rhian was still standing quietly with the tray of dishes in her hands. Kirk turned and spoke to her.

"Do you play chess, Doctor?" he enquired politely.

"Not very well, sir, but I enjoy watching other people play," she said expectantly. She glanced at Spock, who was satisfied with her remark.

Kirk wrinkled his nose. "I reckon I'm going to beat Spock tonight. If you've nothing else planned for this evening, maybe you would like to stay and watch."

Rhian smiled shyly at Kirk, her eyes glowing with gratitude. "Thank you, sir. I would like that."

She took the tray of dishes and put it in the disposal bin. When she returned the game had already begun. She sat down and watched the two men with a thoughtful look on her face.

Either Captain Kirk played reasonably well that evening, or Spock wasn't concentrating properly. Either way, the result of the game was soon quite obvious.

"I believe we have a stalemate, Captain," said Spock at last.

Kirk looked dejected and pulled a face. "I was sure I could beat you tonight, Spock. I even had a wager with Bones," he sighed. "Ah well," he continued, "never mind. How would you like to play some soothing music to calm your poor Captain's mind and body?"

Spock looked at Rhian, eyebrow raised.

"Mmm," she said. "It's a long time since I heard you play."

Spock rose and left the room, leaving the Captain and Rhian chatting together. He soon returned with his lyrette cradled lovingly in his arms.

Kirk suggested that they go through to the observation deck, where they found McCoy lounging in one of the chairs, half asleep.

"Hi, Bones. Mind if we join you?" said Kirk cheerfully.

"Spock has agreed to play us some soothing music."

Half opening his eyes, McCoy waved his arm, indicating the surrounding chairs. "Take the weight off your feet, good people," he said drowsily, and to Spock, "play on, Maestro."

Kirk sat down beside McCoy, picked up the glass at the doctor's feet, and helped himself to some of the contents. "By the way," he said, "you won - again!"

McCoy grinned. "Thought I might," he said sleepily.

Spock sat on the low platform which stretched along the length of one wall beneath the windows, leaned back, and began to play. Rhian stood and gazed at the stars for a while, then she too sat down. The haunting melody filled the room; Rhian continued to stare through the window. After a while her gaze shifted to the Vulcan as he played. Some sixth sense made him look up, and dark eyes met silver.

The music gradually faded away. Both Kirk and McCoy were sleeping soundly. Spock rose to his feet and silently motioned to Rhian, indicating that he wished her to follow him. They crept quietly from the room and out into the corridor.

"Come," said Spock. "I wish to show you something."

He led the way, and eventually they stopped outside a door marked Botanical Section; the doors swished open, and they walked through a laboratory towards a second door marked Botanical Garden.

This door opened, and Rhian gasped at the sight before her. It was as if she had stepped into another world. The domed room was like a beautiful, exotic garden, full of countless plants and flowers, some familiar, some quite alien. The air was heavy with the perfume of many species.

"Oh, Spock!" she exclaimed, gazing around in wonder. "It's beautiful."

She took a deep breath and moved further into the lovely garden. Spock leaned his lyrette against a wooden bench and followed her as she disappeared behind an enormous hydrangea. Rhian sniffed appreciatively. "Doesn't it smell gorgeous?" She stopped and closed her eyes.

Spock stopped behind her. He hesitated, then rested his hands lightly on her shoulders. His heart was beating so fast it felt as if it was going to jump right out of his body. It was no good; he could not fight these strange feelings any more - he wouldn't fight them. He wanted this woman so much he was hurting inside.

Rhian did not move, and he felt a moment of panic. What would he do if she rejected him? He thrust the thought firmly out of his head. It did not bear thinking about. Anyway, it was much too late now, he had made his move. Gently he turned her around to face him. Her eyes were filled with tears which overflowed and slid silently down her cheeks.

"Rhian," he said huskily, "What is wrong?" Had he upset her, had he made his move too soon? Again panic reared its ugly head.

"Nothing is wrong, Spock," she whispered, her voice trembling.

Spock slowly released the breath he had been unconsciously holding.

She leaned towards him and his arms closed around her as she slid her hands tantalisingly around his waist and buried her face in his shoulder. Her body felt soft and comforting. He had never been so close to a woman before, except his mother. This was quite different. He realised that this was what she wanted too, and it didn't matter that his hands were trembling, or that his voice was unsteady as he spoke.

She moved away from him slightly and looked up into his face. Spock bent his head and touched his lips gently to hers. It seemed the natural thing to do. Her lips were moist and tasted delicious. He shuddered. He had never dreamed that close contact with a woman could be like this. It was so exquisite. His arms tightened around her, and the desire that suddenly spread through his body was overwhelming; he closed his eyes and tried to breath evenly in an attempt to regain some measure of control. He felt her lips on his neck, her hands found their way under his tunic, and he could feel them gently massaging his back; he groaned, it felt so good. Bending his head to kiss her again, he knew he no longer had any reason to fear her rejection.

The kiss ended and Spock cradled her gently against him. He looked down at the cloud of dark, shining hair and buried his long fingers into the silky tresses. It was then that he realised that he loved this woman. He wished that the moment would never end.

After a while Rhian raised her head and looked up; her voice was barely audible. "I... I love you," she said, lowering her eyes.

Spock knew how hard it must have been for her to say those words. He put his fingers under her chin and raised her face again. She brought her hands to his face, finding the pressure points; Spock did the same and they pushed gently. The barriers crumbled, their minds made contact, and they found that their feelings matched. It was easier this way; thoughts were much simpler to express than words. They withdrew from the link, and stood quietly for a few moments to regain control.

"Rhian." Spock's voice was low and husky. He held up his right hand, and she fitted her own against it.

"Oneness," she said, looking up at him.

He nodded.

She sighed softly and leaned against him. "Spock," she whispered, "we cannot stay here all night."

He moved away from her, taking her hand as they moved towards the door. Spock picked up his lyrette. "Come with me," he said, releasing her hand as the door swished open.

She walked alongside him; she told him later that she did not know where he was taking her, and furthermore she did not care. They reached Deck E without meeting anyone, and stopped by a door marked with his name. He pressed the button to open it and they entered his cabin. It was peaceful inside - so Vulcan.

Spock replaced his lyrette on the wall and engaged the privacy lock on the door. She waited quietly until he came to her, and

again they touched hands. Gently she reached up and placed her other hand around his neck, bringing his head down so that she could kiss him.

Again Spock felt a surge of desire course through his body. He trembled all over as he carefully removed the beautiful kaftan, gathered her up in his arms, and carried her to the bed. He laid her down, their eyes remaining locked as he removed his own clothes and lay down beside her. Once again they placed their fingers on each others faces. The rush of emotion was stronger this time as a deeper link was established.

How grateful they both were then for their Human heritage.

Afterwards Rhian snuggled up to the first man ever to make love to her. She sighed drowsily, murmuring his name.

Spock looked down at her face, but she was already asleep. He allowed himself a smile of contentment, and holding her closely he too closed his eyes and drifted into sleep.

Hours later Spock woke to find himself alone. Looking at the chronometer and saw that it was well past the time he usually got up in the morning; he would have to hurry and miss breakfast if he was going to be at his post on the bridge in time for his morning duty period. He wondered when Rhian had left him; it was most unusual for him to sleep so heavily that he did not notice someone moving around the room.

Taking a deep breath he stretched his body contentedly, then flicking back the bed cover he rose and headed for the bathroom. As he took his shower he became aware of how happy he was, and how much at peace he felt with himself.

Ten minutes later he was striding along the corridor towards the turbolift. As he reached it the doors opened and out stepped McCoy.

"Dr. McCoy!" he said, with a definite note of elation in his voice. "Good morning!"

"Er... umm... good morning, Spock. Spock?" McCoy croaked. The Vulcan was definitely radiating - what? Happiness? Never! That was impossible... wasn't it?

"Spock!" McCoy said again, with a look of utter disbelief on his face. "Are you all right?"

Spock stepped into the lift and turned to face him, eyebrows raised innocently. "I am perfectly well, thank you, Doctor."

McCoy made to get back into the lift, but the doors closed and he was left standing in front of them. Inside the lift Spock half smiled to himself as he envisaged McCoy standing in the corridor shaking his head in disbelief.

On the bridge Spock found Rhian deep in conversation with the Captain. Kirk turned to face his First Officer.

"Ah, Spock," he said. "The landing party will assemble in sickbay - no-one is to be allowed down on that planet without being immunised against the virus."

Spock nodded and went to his computer station.

"ETA at the planet, Mr. Spock?" asked Kirk.

"One point one five hours, Captain."

"Good. Get that landing party sorted out and report as soon as everything is ready."

"Yes, sir."

"Dr. Tirak," Kirk continued, shifting his attention to Rhian, "go with Mr. Spock and make sure that everyone concerned gets their turn with the hypo."

"Yes, sir," replied Rhian as she followed Spock into the lift.

"Sickbay," ordered Spock as the doors closed. He stood still, not sure what he should say or do.

Rhian had no such qualms. She stepped in front of him and ran her fingers delicately along the tip of his right ear. He half closed his eyes as he felt the link between them; she reached up and kissed the tip of his nose - it was a most curious sensation. He took a deep breath of satisfaction and closed his arms around her, holding her tightly for a moment, then released her reluctantly as they reached their destination.

The landing party consisted of Dr. McCoy, Dr. Tirak, Nurse Chapel, a junior nurse, and two security guards. Each one was summoned to sickbay where Rhian was waiting with a hypo spray. The vaccinations were soon completed, and McCoy turned to Rhian.

"That's everyone done except you, Doctor," he said, a hypo ready in his hand.

"There's no need for me to have one," she assured him. "I had a shot two weeks ago before I left Earth."

Spock also received a shot as he was to beam down to the planet's medical centre when the job was finished, to ensure that everything had been carried out satisfactorily.

Finally everything was ready; the hypo sprays had been carefully packed and the landing party had been thoroughly briefed by Mr. Spock. They made their way to the transporter room, where Spock contacted the bridge.

"Landing party ready for transportation, Captain," he said.

"Very well," answered Kirk. "Good luck."

They took their places on the transporter pads. Spock operated the controls, and he noticed that Rhian gave him a saucy wink as she and the others shimmered and disappeared. He stood alone in the room for a moment, and allowed himself a brief smile.

Hours later Spock contacted McCoy and was told that everything was progressing as planned. The Arian medical team had been treated, and had quickly learned how to prepare the vaccine to treat the already suffering victims.

The junior nurse and the security guards returned to the Enterprise, leaving McCoy, Rhian and Chapel to clear up and prepare for the return of the medical equipment to the Enterprise.

Spock beamed down to speak to the head of the Arian medical team, and the planet's High Councillor; he was gratified to find that they were both very pleased with the efficiency of the Enterprise and its medical staff.

There was a knock on the door and a few latecomers entered the room. Rhian went over to speak to them, and they followed her to the other side of the room where a few hypos were still laid out on the table. She administered the vaccine to the first man, and turned to the second. Suddenly she dropped the hypo and put her fingers to her temples. Spock felt the pain, and was at her side in an instant, catching her as she lost consciousness.

McCoy was close on his heels, and quickly ran his scanner over her. "She's been infected, Spock," he said. "So much for the immunisation she received on Earth." He turned to Christine Chapel, who had come to stand behind him. "Can you finish off here, Nurse Chapel?" he asked.

"Of course, Doctor," she replied. "There are only one or two left to do."

"Good." McCoy flipped open his communicator. "McCoy to Enterprise."

"Enterprise. Kirk here. What's wrong, Bones?"

"It's Dr. Tirak, Jim. The immunisation she received on Earth appears to have been ineffective. She'll have to go into isolation for a day or two."

"Okay, Bones. I'll advise sickbay, and we'll beam you directly into the isolation ward. Stand by. Kirk out."

Spock was still holding Rhian in his arms. He knew that McCoy was curious, but Rhian's health was more important at the moment; he would concern himself with McCoy's thoughts later. His own thoughts were lost in the hum of the transporter, and they materialised in the isolation ward.

McCoy went to the wall intercom. "McCoy to bridge."

"Bridge. Kirk here."

"We've arrived safely, Jim. My congratulations to Mr. Scott. I'll keep you posted. McCoy out."

While McCoy had been speaking Spock had laid Rhian gently on one of the beds. He made her comfortable and switched on the diagnostic panel.

McCoy arrived at the bedside to find an extremely worried looking Vulcan engrossed in the panel readings. The doctor ran his scanner over Rhian again, then inspected the panel himself. The

readings were a strange mixture of Human and Vulcan. Spock knew that over the years McCoy had come to understand the same strange readings from himself; also, the doctor's knowledge of Vulcan medicine had increased considerably since he had joined the Enterprise.

Spock and McCoy looked at each other. The doctor hesitated. Spock showed no signs of leaving to report to the Captain. Choosing his words carefully, he spoke without looking at the First Officer.

"Perhaps you should take the opportunity to report to the Captain. Umm... You could be back here before she wakes up - she'll be out for at least another hour or so."

Spock was too much concerned about Rhian to remonstrate with McCoy, and merely nodded as he looked down into her sleeping face. "I will return in thirty minutes." He turned abruptly and left the room.

Exactly 29.5 minutes later the doors of the isolation ward swished open. Spock ignored McCoy, who was engrossed in a pile of work at his desk, and went straight to Rhian's bedside, where he got himself a chair and sat down.

McCoy walked casually to the other side of the bed. Spock did not look up, but he could sense the doctor's discomfort as he checked the diagnostic panel.

Without looking at the First Officer McCoy said quietly, "Umm... I'm off to the bridge, Spock, if you need me." He quickly left the room before the Vulcan had time to reply, if indeed he intended to do so.

Spock stared at the diagnostic panel, watching the small red light blinking in time with Rhian's heartbeat. It was strangely comforting to sit with her. He had tested the link between them earlier - it was still there, despite the fact that she was fighting the virus. After Dr. McCoy had left he had told her that she would recover, and that he would be here when she awoke. Now all he had to do was wait.

The time seemed to pass so slowly. His eyes began to feel heavy, and gradually Rhian's face became more and more blurred. He shook his head to try and disperse the groggy feeling, but nothing happened. He couldn't shake his head - indeed, he couldn't shake anything at all. His whole body felt leaden. The feeling struck him as being familiar - it was the same feeling he had experienced the morning he had collided with Rhian in the recreation room doorway.

He forced his head up slightly to look at the panel above her head. All he could see and hear was the sight and sound of the red light blinking - on - off - on - off. His eyes went slowly back to her face, but everything was out of focus. He began to feel light-headed, as if his body was floating. Everything was moving so slowly. The red light was still blinking - on - off - on - off.

What was happening to him? His limbs felt so heavy he could hardly move. His mind struggled to regain control. He began to

take deep breaths - in - out - in - out. Summoning all his strength he managed to sit up, only to find that someone had begun to slap his face.

His face began to sting - this was ridiculous. He must stop them. He couldn't; he could not lift his arms - they were too heavy, and just hung at his sides, useless.

The slapping continued. He began to breathe deeply again, concentrating, using all his power to try and force some energy into his useless arms. Suddenly the adrenalin began to flow and he caught the offending hand as it flew to make contact with his face once again. His vision began to clear and he realised that it was he who was sitting on the bed, he who was the patient, not Rhian. His hand still gripped Rhian's wrist.

"You're hurting me," she said, wincing with pain.

He let go and looked up at the woman standing in front of him. Rhian Tirak - she really was here... But surely it was she who was ill? He frowned, then his face cleared as he remembered the falling rocks, the pain as they crashed down on top of him. Then - blackness.

She was smiling at him, and he thought how glad he was to see a familiar face. He started to get up.

"Oh no you don't!" she exclaimed, putting her hands on his shoulders and gently pushing him back onto the bed. "You are not getting up yet, Mr. Spock. You must give your broken bones time to heal properly."

Spock looked down to see the casts that held his left arm and right leg still so that the bones could knit together in the correct position. He also realised that his chest had been bound firmly; he must have damaged some ribs. He relaxed back onto the pillow and watched Rhian as she tidied the bed cover.

"How long have you been on board?" he asked.

"Since just after you were brought back from Capricus V. No sooner had I arrived and reported for duty than Captain Kirk brought me here to care for you."

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Thank you," he said quietly.

The corners of her mouth tilted slightly. "My pleasure," she replied. She sighed, and stopped what she was doing, her eyes softened. "I have missed you, Spock," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Spock opened his mouth to speak, but changed his mind as Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy entered the room.

"Ah!" said McCoy. "So you're awake."

"It would appear so, Doctor," replied Spock dryly.

"And with all your usual charm. Hrmph! Those rocks obviously didn't hit you hard enough," retorted McCoy.

Spock's eyebrow disappeared even further under his hair, and Kirk laughed. Rhian looked from one to the other in amazement.

"Don't mind them, Nurse," said Kirk. "My two colleagues spend most of their time bickering with each other."

"Bickering, Captain?" said Spock questioningly. "Vulcans are incapable of bickering."

"Like hell they are!" snapped McCoy. "They're notorious for it."

"Okay, okay," chuckled Kirk. "That's enough. Bones - come with me. Spock - rest. Nurse Tirak - see that my First Officer stays exactly where he is. I don't want to see him on duty until he can turn somersaults around this room."

Spock frowned slightly. "Captain, why should I wish to turn somersaults around sickbay? Surely it would be more sensible to take that sort of exercise in the gymnasium."

Kirk smiled at his friend. "Never mind, Spock. Just get well."

"That, I intend to do with the greatest speed. The very thought of spending more time than necessary under Dr. McCoy's supervision is most disconcerting."

McCoy almost exploded. "Spock...!" he spluttered.

"Enough!" ordered Kirk, and he ushered the thoroughly enraged doctor from the room.

Rhian turned to her patient. "Tsk, tsk! Mr. Spock, you really shouldn't tease him so much. He is obviously a very emotional person."

Spock was about to reply, but she put her fingers to his lips. "Shhh!" she said. "Lie down, please, you must rest. Captain's orders."

He lay down and she pulled the cover over him; as she did so her perfume wafted into his nostrils. It was of Vulcan origin. He sniffed appreciatively, and relaxed. Looking up at her he said quietly, "Your perfume..."

She smiled. "Do you like it?"

"Yes," he said drowsily.

"I hoped you might," she whispered.

He was almost asleep. She smiled down at him.

"Your mother said you would," she said.

EPILOGUE

It was two weeks after Spock had regained consciousness. His broken bones were almost completely healed and he was now able to walk unaided, albeit very slowly. He and Rhian were spending more and more time together. He taught her how to play three-dimensional chess properly, and she had actually beaten the Captain on one occasion - although not single handedly.

The day finally arrived when Spock was allowed to move back into his quarters. Rhian was glad to see him better, but sorry to see him leave sickbay. She would miss seeing him every day. Soon he would be back on duty, and she would see him even less. She felt, however, that they had become much closer lately, and hoped that they would become more than friends now that he was free of T'Pring.

Spock and Kirk had spent the evening together. Rhian joined them after her duty period ended, and ten minutes later McCoy arrived and suggested that they go to the observation deck to relax and watch the stars go by. Spock looked at his companions, and the scene seemed strangely familiar.

After a while Kirk stood up and stretched, yawning noisily. "I'm off to bed. Goodnight, everyone."

"Me, too," said McCoy, standing up. "Spock, it's time you hit the sack as well."

Spock looked at the doctor in amazement. "Hit the sack, Doctor?"

"Oh, never mind," answered McCoy. "Ask Nurse Tirak - she'll explain."

He was too tired to argue.

"Nurse, make sure he gets to bed at a reasonable time."

"I will, Doctor."

They sat in silence for a while. Eventually Rhian stood up and held out her hand to her companion.

"Come on, Spock. 'To hit the sack' is an old slang expression; it simply means it's time to go to bed."

"Indeed."

"Yes, indeed. Come on."

He stood up stiffly, rejecting her offered hand.

They made their way slowly to Deck 5. It was Spock's first full day out of sickbay, and he had already walked too far. As they reached the door he stumbled; Rhian stretched out her hand and he grasped it to steady himself.

"I knew you should have gone to bed earlier," she said sharply; her tone sounded quite abrupt, and she hastened to add that she was worried he might have overtired himself.

"I am quite all right."

"Oh no you are not," she replied.

She turned and hit the door button, then ignoring his protests helped him into the room and onto the bed. He was slightly irritated to find that he was too tired to argue. He sat obediently while she removed his boots, then his tunic. It was not right that

she should undress him, he thought, but again, she was a nurse - of course it was all right.

She stood in front of him, hands on hips, and said, "If I find out that you are not behaving yourself I will recommend to Dr. McCoy that you return to sickbay."

"I will behave," he said meekly.

"Good." Her voice softened and she lifted his legs onto the bed. "Now then," she continued, "loosen your trousers."

Spock looked up sharply. This was going a bit far. Why had he not ordered her from the room? Chapel wouldn't have got this far.

"You cannot sleep in your trousers, Spock." She smiled slightly. "Surely you are not shy?"

Spock didn't move. Boots and tunic were one thing, but trousers... Even Vulcans had some modesty.

She sighed. "All right," she said, easing the bedcover from under him. She covered him over, leaving his legs showing from the knees down. "Right, now loosen your trousers. Please."

"Very well. You will turn your back to me, please."

Rhian turned her back and smiled to herself. Grown men were worse than children.

"I am ready now." Spock looked embarrassed as Rhian tidied his clothes and tucked the cover neatly around him. "You will tell no-one."

"I'm not going to tell anyone, Spock. I am a nurse, here to help you, not to make you look foolish."

He relaxed slightly. He was being stupid - she was only doing her job.

She dimmed the lights and in the close proximity of his bedroom her perfume made him feel calm and slightly light-headed. He recalled her words when he had first noticed the pleasant fragrance. 'Your mother said you would.' Would what?

She stood quietly beside his bed, the perfume becoming stronger as she moved to straighten the cover. He caught her hand, and she looked at him questioningly, eyebrow raised. Dark eyes gazed deeply into silver grey, and locked. He had never forgotten her eyes - they were so beautiful. He squeezed his own eyes shut, and opened them again. It was obviously the perfume that made him feel as he did...

Rhian raised her other hand and ran her fingers lightly over his cheek.

"Rhian..." he breathed, his body quivering uncontrollably. The perfume... it must be the perfume...

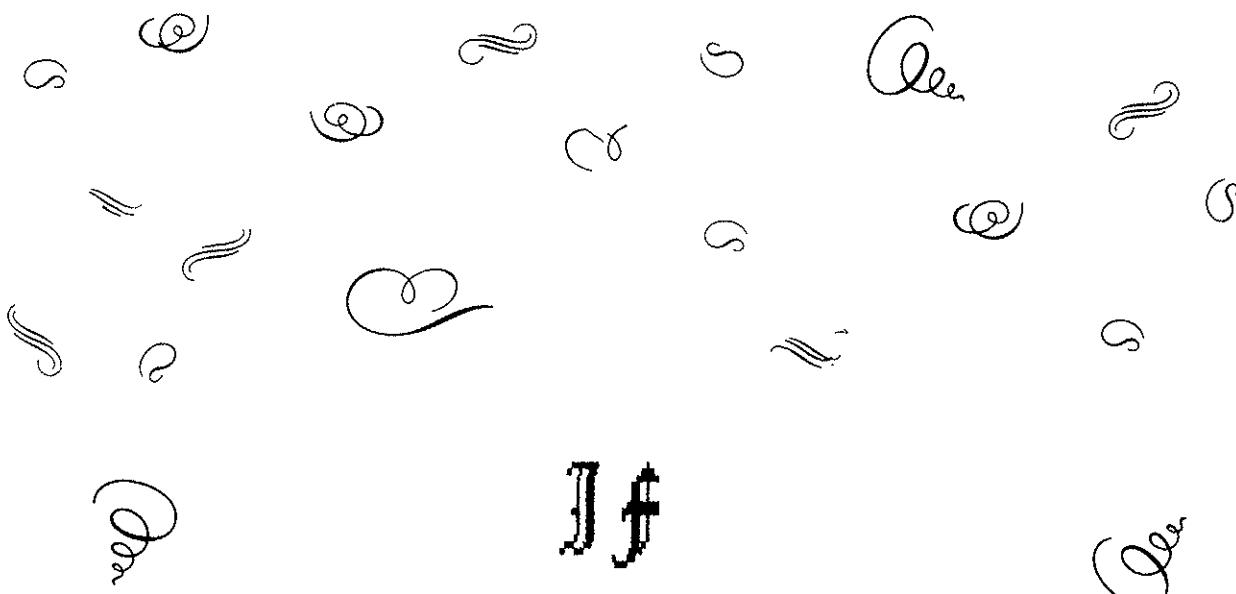
She smiled at him lovingly, bent her head, and kissed him tenderly on the lips, knowing the effect the perfume would have on him. His mother was right.

"Sleep now. We will talk tomorrow," she whispered, her voice trembling slightly. Again she bent her head, this time touching her lips to his forehead as a mother would to her child.

Then, she was gone.

Spock tried breathing deeply to regain control, but the air was still heavy with her perfume. His mother obviously knew more about Vulcans than he gave her credit for. She certainly knew about perfume. He tried unsuccessfully to sort out his jumbled thoughts, but abandoned the idea. Instead, he prepared himself for sleep.

A faint smile rested on his lips as he slipped into unconsciousness. It seemed as if his dream might come true.



If I come to you,
 What can I bring of worth
 When this green Earth is all
 I've ever known?
 Is my courage equal
 To all that I'll face
 In the constant struggle
 There to find a home?
 Everything you take for granted
 I'll need to learn.
 Everything that's natural
 I'll find so strange.
 Will you be patient with me
 If I prove less
 Than I must be
 To fit your world of change?
 Will you hold me close
 When my heart weeps dry tears,
 Fearing that my best efforts
 Have failed?
 If I bring you just my love,
 Is it enough?
 You do not answer...
 And deep down my heart quails.

PRELUDE TO AN ENTERPRISE INCIDENT

by

Teresa Abbott

They sit in the briefing room, the table between them, and it might as well be a wall.

Kirk speaks first, his voice tight and controlled, and he is deeply aware that he is hiding behind his authority.

"So you're telling me, Mr. Spock, that you still haven't found a suitable method by which we can achieve our objective?"

Spock also knows how to take refuge in formality, although it has been a long time since he has had to adopt quite such a Vulcan front with this man.

"I regret that I have been unable to find a viable solution."

With a gesture of impatience the Captain leans forward and punches up some data on the computer screen.

"And this?" The words on the screen rest accusingly between them.

Spock's face doesn't change. "I repeat, I have been unable to find an acceptable solution."

"So it is viable?" Kirk is not one to be fooled by the juggling of words. The Vulcan's stony silence confirms this.

Suddenly tired of their verbal fencing, the Captain allows his shoulders to sag, and he sits back in the chair.

"Spock, please. I don't like it either. We've been through it and through it, and there is no alternative. We're both of us under orders and this is one time when personal considerations will have to be pushed aside."

For a moment the appeal almost softens the Vulcan's resolve. He knows his Captain too well, however, to be won over so quickly by his charm.

"Sir, my opinion stands. I find myself unable to agree with your proposed course of action."

The extreme formality of the Vulcan's reply finally shatters Kirk's control.Flushed with anger, he stands, and his voice is as cold as ice.

"I don't need your agreement. If necessary, I'll make it an order."

Their eyes meet and hold, and for a second or two something passes between them, something which neither of them can at this time acknowledge if they are to go through with the suggested events.

Finally Spock looks down. "That is, of course, your prerogative, Captain."

In exasperation, Kirk turns and leaves the room, without even glancing back, unable and unwilling to continue the argument further.

Left alone in the briefing room, Spock allows his firm control to slip. The confrontation has been unpleasant, but inevitable. He has known that ever since coming across the library entry several hours ago. He leans forward now and re-reads the words on the computer monitor, words he knows virtually from memory.

'Tal-moran: one of several Vulcan methods of self defence, all prefixed 'tal-', each incapacitating the victim to a different degree. In its most extreme form, tal-shaya, the object is the death of the victim, either as a form of defence, or as a method of execution.

'Tal-moran does not kill the victim, but inflicts a paralysis that closely resembles death. For Vulcans, the effects are not long lasting. For non-Vulcan races, the effects are not well researched. Logic, therefore, does not dictate its use unless there is no alternative.'

Spock's mind flies back over the years, as it did the first time he came across the entry. He sees himself again as a young boy receiving instruction on Vulcan. He remembers with absolute clarity the filmed demonstration of the various Vulcan nerve grips.

Tal-moran. The agony on the face of the victim is still vividly etched in his memory.

Now his mind spans the years to another time, also on Vulcan. McCoy's voice, charged with emotion. "These men are friends. To force them to fight..."

Ironically, this time it is Jim himself who is asking Spock to use violence as a means to an end. Expecting him to voluntarily inflict such a dangerous, unpredictable paralysis, while totally trusting that Spock will never harm him.

In theory, the risk of permanent injury is probably minimal. Jim will not consciously fight the paralysis, thus lessening the chance of permanent damage.

Yet Jim's is hardly the most pliable of minds. What if his subconscious, so used to sensing Spock as a friend, rebels at the unexpected image of Spock as enemy, and resists? The effects would be catastrophic for both of them.

There is no justification in Spock's mind for risking such a possibility.

Admittedly, Starfleet is very anxious that they proceed with the plan as fast as possible. Yet Spock still feels that if they think this thing through properly they will find another alternative.

Resigned, he makes his decision. Even though Jim will not fully understand or approve, he will have to stand firm in his

opposition.

If Jim insists in rushing ahead with this plan, over-optimistic and impulsive as usual, he will have to do so as Captain, and not as friend.

Saddened by this temporary rift in their friendship, Spock finally stands and leaves the room.

Alone in his cabin later that evening, Kirk wearily rests his head in his hands and finally acknowledges defeat. He has obviously seriously underestimated just how hard all this would be for Spock. He should have anticipated that the rules Spock so believed in would make it difficult for him to approve the proposals. He understands that Spock's objections arise mainly out of fear for his Captain's safety.

Ultimately, however, Starfleet orders cannot be delayed any longer, and, as usual, the final burden of responsibility rests with him. Although he would much prefer Spock to back him in this as his friend, and not just his second-in-command, this time he will have to be strong enough for both of them and override Spock's objections.

With regret, he concedes that this time he will have to make it a Command Decision.



IMPASSE - KIRK



You stand beside me
As you did of old,
And yet you look at me
With stranger's eyes.
I try to stir the ashes
Of what was,
But you just look back
In polite surprise.



No matter how I try
You won't respond;
Your face a once-loved door
That now has closed.
I can't reach you.
Still, stubbornly, I try;
But if I ever shall
I cannot know.



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